The New Criterion

June 1996

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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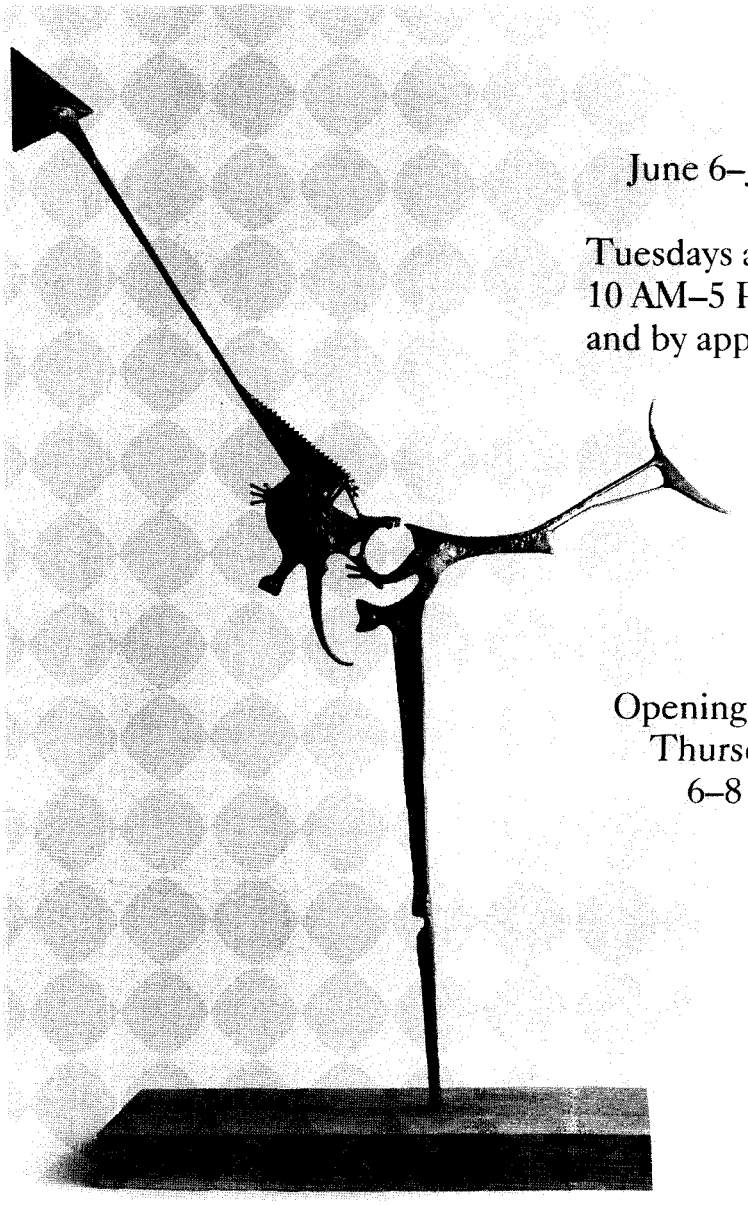

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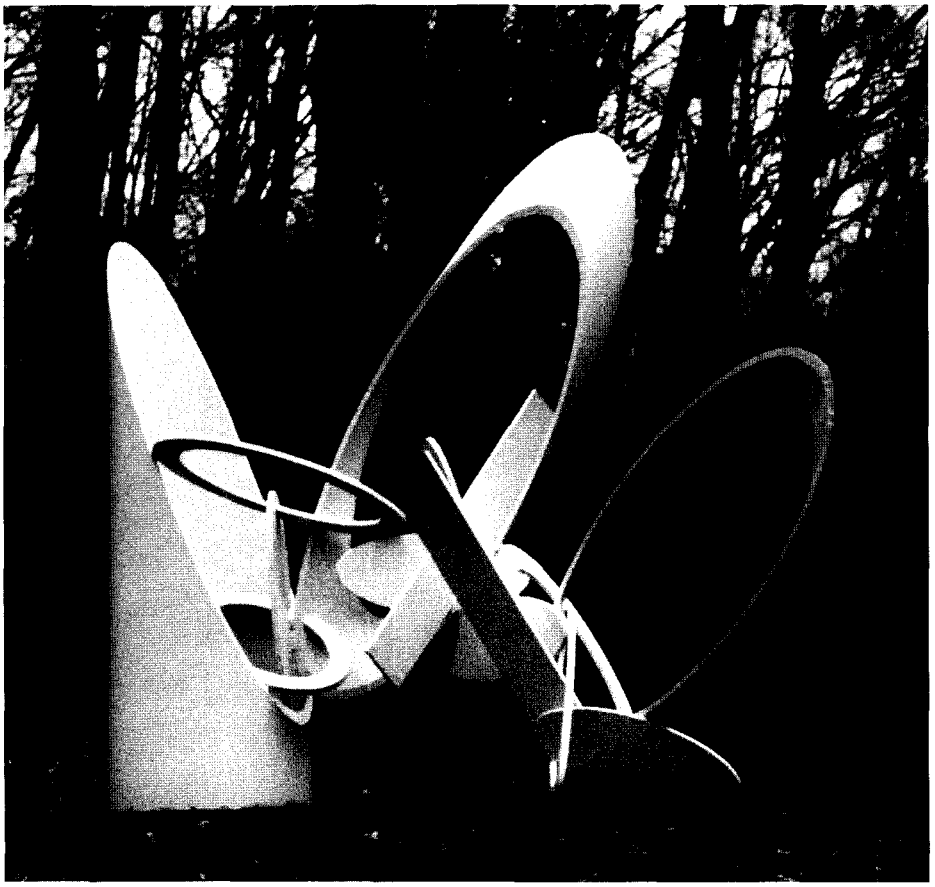

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Notes & Comments: June 1996

Professor Sokal's Transgression

Some things are definitely worth waiting for. In our May issue, we devoted prominent attention to the latest issue of *Social Text*, a trendy, left-wing quarterly put out by the trendy, left-wing academic publisher, Duke University Press (see "'Diversity,' 'cultural studies' & other mistakes" by Roger Kimball). Edited by Andrew Ross, a postmodern parlor Marxist who occupies an expensive professorship at New York University, this special issue of *Social Text* was devoted to the so-called "Science Wars"—that is, to the attack on science and rationality that has lately become such an embarrassing growth industry among chic academic "humanists," social scientists, and other partisans of "cultural studies."

Given the topic, it is likely that we would sooner or later have caught sight of this episode of academic irresponsibility. What brought it to our attention right off the mark, however, was the news, leaked to us by a friend, that one of the contributions to this issue was a hoax. The author of the piece, a professor of physics at New York University named Alan Sokal, got wind that we knew about the hoax and prevailed upon us to keep his secret until he published his own account of the matter, which appeared a few weeks ago in the May/June issue of *Lingua Franca*, a bimonthly review of academia.

It is a delicious, if ultimately a disturbing, story. First, the delicious part. Professor Sokal's piece is an unsurpassable work of mimicry, hilariously portentous. Its title—"Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity"—captures in ten words the whole atmosphere of obscurantism and pretentiousness that characterizes this branch of academic mystification. Its theme—that there exists (somewhere, somehow) a deep connection between quantum theory and radical politics—is just the kind of preposterous ideological gambit that appeals to those who hanker after a "liberatory postmodern science." And its manner is a letter-perfect parody of the genre, from Professor Sokal's invocation of "the dogma imposed by the long post-Enlightenment hegemony over the Western intellectual outlook" in his first paragraph to the thirteen pages of hermetic footnotes with which he decorates the fifteen-page essay. Even his use of scare quotes is masterly: "it has become increasingly apparent," we read near the beginning of his piece, "that physical 'reality,' no less than social 'reality,' is at bottom a social and linguistic construct" and that "scientific 'knowledge,' so far from being objective, reflects and encodes the dominant ideologies and power relations of the culture that produced it." Nor should we neglect to mention, finally, the many fawning references to the editors and hangers-on of *Social Text* with which he bedizens his essay.

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As we noted in our May issue, there is a great deal that might be said about Professor Sokal's piece and its appearance in *Social Text*. To begin with, it shows vividly that Andrew Ross and the other members of the "Editorial Collective" who oversaw this issue of the journal cannot distinguish between sense and nonsense. Or, to put it more precisely, they cannot distinguish between deliberate nonsense and the unconscious variety that they themselves produce and pawn off on their students and the public as "scholarship" and "critical theory." As Professor Sokal observed in his revelation of the hoax in *Lingua Franca*, nowhere in his piece was there "anything resembling a logical sequence of thought; one finds only citations of authority, plays on words, strained analogies, and bald assertions." Andrew Ross and his colleagues failed to notice this for two reasons. First, because their own work—perfectly epitomized by their contributions to this issue of *Social Text*—relies entirely on the same devices. And, second, because they applauded the implication of Professor Sokal's essay that "the search for truth in science must be subordinated to a political agenda."

In our view, this episode not only exhibits the culpable intellectual frivolity of Andrew Ross and his colleagues at *Social Text*. It also goes a long way toward exploding the claims of "cultural studies" and its many offshoots to be taken at all seriously as a legitimate scholarly enterprise. And this brings us to the disturbing part of the story. At the center of cultural studies is the contention that all truth is a social construction: a form of rhetoric whose ultimate determinants are a matter of politics and power relations. It follows from this view that the ideal of objectivity is little more than a species of fiction, and evidence is merely a fancy kind of propaganda. The ultimate effect of this view is to render the search for truth, in science as much as in the humanities, completely bootless. Which indeed is one reason that essays such as "Transgressing the Boundaries" can be published in a supposedly reputable journal devoted to cultural studies.

We wonder what the deans overseeing professors such as Andrew Ross will make of this episode. Will they regard it as one more welcome piece of publicity—akin, perhaps, to Professor Ross's declaration in *New York* magazine a couple of years ago that he had given up on books for television and pop culture? And what about his students—how will they now regard his supervision of their work? And what about his students' parents? After all, they are paying some $30,000 per year for the privilege of having their children educated: how many professors, they might well wonder, share Andrew Ross's views? Alumni, college presidents and trustees: we think that they, too, might do well to ponder the implications of this remarkable episode. What does it tell them about the intellectual health and pedagogical competence of the institutions under their care?

Readers of *The New Criterion* know that we have often had occasion to criticize cultural studies and to pose such questions. With this in mind, we think it worth noting that Alan Sokal's hoax was not a politically partisan gesture. When we have criticized the academic establishment, our comments have routinely been dismissed as "conservative," "right-wing," "reactionary," etc. It will be difficult for Andrew Ross & Co. to respond to Professor Sokal with such epithets. In his piece for *Lingua Franca*, Professor Sokal describes himself as a "leftist" and a "feminist," and he proudly reveals that he taught mathematics in Nicaragua under the Sandinista regime. Doubtless we would have many disagreements with Professor Sokal. But we agree with him wholeheartedly that the ambition—nearly ubiquitous among the academic Left—to emasculate truth and objectivity, rendering them coefficients of one or another political scenario, is an in-

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tellectual and moral disaster. To be sure, the doctrine of social constructivism employs emancipatory language with incontinent abandon; but its effect is to imprison its partisans in a conceptual hall of mirrors in which, as Professor Sokal puts it, "incomprehensibility becomes a virtue; allusions, metaphors, and puns substitute for evidence and logic."

Finally, we should say a few words about the response to Professor Sokal's performance. Reading his piece in *Lingua Franca*, we got the sense that Professor Sokal harbored the hope that his prank would be welcomed by many in the academic establishment as a bracing dash of cold water: an intellectual wake-up call, as it were. If so, we fear that he was being a little naïve. Professor Sokal's real-life leftist credentials may be in better order than those of many self-professed left-wing academics. But—to judge by the early response, anyway—his hoax will be regarded not as a salutary admonition but as an act of apostasy.

Of course, it is hardly surprising that Andrew Ross should take strong objection to Professor Sokal's experiment in satire: he more than anyone emerges looking a complete fool. Still, one might have expected him to exercise more circumspection than he did in his draft reply to *Lingua Franca*, a copy of which is floating around the Internet. Instead, he produced a rambling, pathetic document, full of flaccid exculpatory gestures and random *ad hominem* accusations. From the first, Professor Ross assures his readers, he and his fellow editors "considered Sokal's unsolicited article to be a little hokey." Had it come from a humanist or social scientist, it would have been "regarded as sophomoric and/or outdated (and therefore unacceptable to the editors)." But since it came from a scientist, they decided to include it as "a curio, or symptomatic document," even though its main points were "rather well known." (Is it strange that deliberate nonsense should be blithely described as "rather well known"? Well, never mind.) Revelation of the hoax apparently did not alter this patronizing interest in the essay, but it did make the editors of *Social Text* reconsider their "perception of [Sokal's] own good faith as a self-proclaimed leftist": after all, how could any good leftist dare to ridicule them? Professor Ross winds up insinuating that not only are Professor Sokal's ideological bona fides questionable but also that he is a bit of a male chauvinist: "his actions," we read, "smacked of a temper often attributed to 'unreconstructed male leftists.' " So there.

Even more atavistic but mercifully much briefer were the comments of Stanley Aronowitz, a Marxist sociologist and cofounder of *Social Text* who teaches at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. In a somewhat obtuse but nevertheless extremely damaging front-page report on the hoax in *The New York Times*, Professor Aronowitz sputters that Alan Sokal "got it wrong. One of the reasons he got it wrong is he's ill-read and half-educated." Very nice, that, especially from someone who in his own contribution to the "Science Wars" issue of *Social Text* cannot even spell Niels Bohr's name correctly.

Professors Ross and Aronowitz's responses are not edifying. Nevertheless, since they were themselves among the direct targets of Professor Sokal's satire, their floundering rage is perhaps understandable. Far more troubling was the long Op-Ed piece by the notorious Stanley Fish—self-proclaimed sophist and cultural studies enthusiast—that appeared in *The New York Times* on May 21. In his capacity as executive director of the Duke University Press, Professor Fish may have felt called upon to defend the integrity of his press. But in "Professor Sokal's Bad Joke" he writes not as an administrator but as a commissar of cultural studies.

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Anyone familiar with Professor Fish's rhetorical bag of tricks will instantly recognize his handiwork, which proceeds from simple misrepresentation through sophistical legerdemain to a complete reversal of the truth. The chief purpose of Alan Sokal's satire was to expose the extreme subjectivism that characterizes so much that goes under the name of cultural studies and literary theory today. Professor Ross and his colleagues were happy to publish an essay that declared physical reality a "social and linguistic construct" because they, too, believe—or at least profess in their writings—the doctrine of social constructivism. It is hardly surprising that every other page of this issue of *Social Text* contains some such statement: extreme subjectivism is a staple of the cultural studies industry. Stanley Fish himself has been pleased to declare (along with many other absurdities) that "there is no such thing as literal meaning." Nevertheless, he begins his attack on Professor Sokal by assuring the readers of *The New York Times* that "none of [Sokal's] targets would ever make such statements." He claims that partisans of cultural studies "neither dispute the accomplishments of science nor deny the existence or power of scientific procedure." No matter that practically every book he oversees at the Duke University Press contradicts this: if "there is no such thing as literal meaning" then why should one feel constrained to tell the truth?

Professor Fish has generally displayed a nice sense of just how outrageous he can be without alienating the public; it is part of what has made him such a successful controversialist. But this time we fear that he may have misjudged his audience. As usual, he proclaims a radical subjectivist position, and then endeavors to disarm criticism beforehand by insisting that what he is proposing is really just what common sense has told us all along. In the present case, after denying that any serious professor of cultural studies would actually argue that the truths of science were social constructions, he proceeds to insist that at bottom science, like everything else, is . . . a social construction. No doubt intending to introduce a homey touch, he compares the procedures of science with those of baseball: "the distinction between baseball and science," he writes, "is not finally so firm." We wonder whether even the most avid fan of the game will find this reassuring. Professor Fish concludes with one of his breathtaking, Orwellian reversals, claiming that "it is Alan Sokal, not his targets, who threatens to undermine the intellectual standards he vows to protect." He also comes within a hair's breadth of accusing Professor Sokal of fraud. Thus does the defendant transform himself into the prosecutor, declaring that black is white and night is day. It is a shabby, disreputable performance, an insult to Professor Sokal and a calumny on truth.

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Picasso: portraits or masks?

by Hilton Kramer

Defining what constitutes a "portrait" in Picasso's work is not a simple matter. . . . It may emerge that, after this exhibition, it will be even harder than before to define what Picasso meant by a portrait.

—William Rubin, "Reflections on Picasso and Portraiture"

Of the many striking things about the exhibition called "Picasso and Portraiture: Representation and Transformation,"[1] which William Rubin has organized at the Museum of Modern Art this spring, the most remarkable may be the large number of images that, by traditional standards, hardly qualify as portraits at all. It is of course the premise upon which the exhibition has been selected that, as Mr. Rubin writes on the first page of his "Reflections on Picasso and Portraiture," "by redefining the portrait as a record of *the artist's personal responses* to the subject, Picasso transformed it from a purportedly objective document into a frankly subjective one." There can certainly be no question but that Picasso's influence in this respect, as in others, has been immense. For as Mr. Rubin also observes: "Picasso invented or reinvented the abstract, surreal, classical, and expressionist portrait types as we know them in twentieth-century art."

This may be a more questionable artistic legacy, however, than Mr. Rubin and the colleagues who have collaborated with him on this portrait project are prepared to acknowledge, and the complex issues that loom over this exhibition are not greatly clarified by his blithely consigning the entire history of pre-Picasso portraiture to the lowly realm of the "purportedly objective document." There is indeed something aesthetically unseemly in applying the word "document" to what we have reason to admire in the greatest portraits of the Western tradition from, say, Titian, Rembrandt, and Velásquez to Degas, Cézanne, and Van Gogh. Social historians may wish to consult such portraits as "documents," but Mr. Rubin is presumably addressing us as a historian and connoisseur of painting and drawing on this occasion. About Picasso as a painter and a draftsman, Mr. Rubin surely knows a good deal more than most of us, yet, in both the exhibition he has given us in "Picasso and Portraiture" and in his accompanying "Reflections" on the subject,

1 "Picasso and Portraiture: Representation and Transformation" opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on April 28, 1996, and remains on view through September 17. A smaller version of the show will reopen at the Grand Palais, Paris, on October 18, 1996, and remain on view through January 20, 1997. A catalogue of the exhibition edited by William Rubin, with essays by Mr. Rubin, Anne Baldassari, Pierre Daix, Michael C. FitzGerald, Brigitte Léal, Marilyn McCully, Robert Rosenblum, Hélène Seckel, and Kirk Varnedoe, has been published by the Museum of Modern Art (496 pages, $75; $35 paper).

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the focus is often less on the quality of Picasso's achievement as a portraitist than on the way the artist's portraits—and, for that matter, the many objects in the exhibition that aren't portraits—may be seen to provide us with an index to their creator's state of mind or erotic disposition at the time of their creation.

The principal focus, in other words, is once again on the life of the artist and the legend of his career rather than on the character and quality of his art. Not invariably so, to be sure, for there are indeed masterpieces to be seen in this exhibition, beginning with the *Portrait of Gertrude Stein* and the *Self-Portrait with Palette* (both 1906) and extending through some of the early Cubist portraits (especially those of Wilhelm Uhde, Ambroise Vollard, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, and others in 1910) to the neoclassical portrait drawings of the Teens and early 1920s. By the mid-Twenties, however, the functions of the portraiture yield to the more narcissistic project of "*the artist's personal responses* to the subject," at which point the portrait subject—especially when the subject is a woman—is totally subordinated to the hammering demands of the artist's will.

It is interesting, moreover, that Picasso never again attempted anything like the *Gertrude Stein* painting—a monumental portrait of a woman who was not for him a romantic attachment but whom he had reason to regard as having an artistic authority and aspiration comparable to his own. That was certainly the way Stein saw herself. It was the way she presented herself to her inner circle, and it was one of the bases of her early friendship with Picasso. (Another, of course, was her role as a patron of his work.) Never mind that as a writer Stein wasn't an artist in Picasso's class; he couldn't have known that at the time. It was important that she was an avant-garde artist and that she admired *his* art, for this clearly drove him to produce something major—something that went beyond anything he had created up to that time—in completing her portrait. Never again did Picasso produce a major painting of a woman that was not, in one way or another, a record of his amours.

It is worth pausing over the *Portrait of Gertrude Stein* for another reason: its mask-like visage. It is well known that the painting caused Picasso immense trouble. As Mr. Rubin writes:

> Picasso had labored over Stein's portrait for many months before departing for Gosol in May 1906. In the course of eighty or ninety sittings, he arrived at a satisfactory rendering of her hands and body, but he remained dissatisfied with the depiction of her face, and painted it out before leaving Paris. Shortly after his return from Gosol, he repainted Stein's face, without asking for any sittings. His new, conceptual understanding of resemblance had made further perceptual "input" superfluous.

Pierre Daix takes up the story in his essay on "Portraiture in Picasso's Primitivism and Cubism," in the book accompanying the current exhibition. "Gertrude Stein," writes Mr. Daix, "connected Picasso's stopping work on her portrait with the 1906 Salon des Indépendants and in doing so offers us a clue to Picasso's decision. Perhaps the shock he experienced on seeing Matisse's large canvas the *Joy of Life*, which hung in triumph at the Salon, and Matisse's large exhibition at the Druet gallery, had something to do with it." Suddenly, Picasso felt artistically outdistanced by the older Matisse, and as Mr. Daix observes: "Their competition would become even more intense when the Steins decided to buy the *Joy of Life* and when Matisse and Picasso finally met." And further:

> None of this means that in the spring of 1906 Picasso could already foresee the transformation of the *Portrait of Gertrude Stein* into the image we know. But we can surmise that he was discomforted by Matisse's and Derain's "anticlassical" evolution and most likely began to question the path he was following, one

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that was too influenced by the Ingres' ideal of perfection.

Challenged by the primitivistic elements that were already vividly assimilated into the pictures of Matisse and his circle, Picasso responded by altering the conception of the portrait he had been at work on for so many months. The failed attempt to provide the Stein portrait with an Ingresque visage was abandoned. In Spain that summer he found in the so-called *Gosol Madonna*, a twelfth-century polychrome sculpture with a masklike face, a sufficiently "anticlassical" or primitivistic solution to suit his newly acquired ambition for the picture. He tested and perfected his mastery of this new vocabulary of primitivization in his renderings of the only model he had at hand—his mistress Fernande Olivier—and made such rapid progress in that direction that, as Mr. Daix points out, "Fernande had already become something of a plastic object in Picasso's mind by the middle of the summer of 1906." As a result, writes Mr. Daix, the "psychological emptiness" of the Fernande portraits was "now complete." Which raises the question, of course, of whether the Fernande portraits could any longer be considered portraits. For the Stein portrait, however, Picasso had always a larger ambition: to produce an icon of the avant-garde.

> When he returned to Paris in late summer [writes Mr. Daix], Picasso threw all of this accumulated experience into the masklike face of Gertrude, completing her portrait in the form in which we know it today. . . . This was how he created for Gertrude Stein a face as a woman of the avant-garde.

The portrait face, with its marks of an individual identity, had been fatefully supplanted by the mask, which symbolizes something generic and impersonal.

Soon thereafter the Picassoid mask would assume African rather than Iberian features, and in the picture—*Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*—that Picasso produced in 1907 with the intention of wresting the leadership of the Paris avant-garde from Matisse, elements of African and Iberian forms are discordantly combined to eradicate the last traces of the classical tradition. *Les Demoiselles*, whatever its autobiographical sources may be, doesn't qualify as a group portrait. It is, if anything, a sardonic anti-pastoral, set in an urban brothel, designed to ridicule and upstage Matisse's evocation of the pastoral in the *Joy of Life*. Yet even though *Les Demoiselles* isn't portraiture, its absence in the "Picasso and Portraiture" exhibition is keenly felt because so much that follows in this very large show is indebted to the precedents it set—not least in its precedents in the brutish depiction of women, a brutishness that often turns the entire female figure, and not only the face, into a masklike contrivance.

The mask is, of course, an image of a fixed, highly simplified emotion. It is not an image of character or personality. It is not an emblem of individual identity. It is primitive in its expression of feeling. However complex its design, the mask is inimical to subtlety, contradiction, or intricacy. As a vehicle of feeling, it is not a thing of parts. It is blunt and basic. It is all one thing and not another. Quite the opposite, in other words, from the kind of human face we are likely to take an interest in: a face expressive of experience, a face marked by life and thought.

It was precisely for its dehumanized simplifications that Picasso seems to have been so strongly drawn to the mask and to masklike contrivance in depicting his friends, lovers, patrons, and other contemporaries. His 1953 *Stalin* is no less a mask than his 1935 *Woman with a Hat*, which is said to be a "portrait" of his wife Olga. The one is a recognizable likeness that was meant to aggrandize a tyrant, the other is an abstraction designed to annihilate the existence of a discarded spouse, yet both are masklike representations that convey little or nothing about their subjects but much about Picasso's characteristic impulse to reduce the complexities of life to a radical

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simplification. He was very superstitious, of course; one might even say, profoundly superstitious. Even primitive, perhaps, in his belief in art as a fetish—as he once confided to André Malraux—that might be used to ward off evil spirits. "If we give spirits a form," he said, "we become independent." That is a formula for creating masks, not portraits.

It is one of the paradoxes of the "Picasso and Portraiture" exhibition, however, that some of the artist's most thoughtful portraits are the nearly abstract Cubist portraits he produced in the period immediately preceding the First World War. However abstract their forms, their subjects remained recognizable, and as portraits the paintings have a wit, a sociability, an atmosphere of respect, and even an appreciation of character and a kind of nobility, that I find missing in both the early portraits and the later, more sentimental, neoclassical ones. They are also, for the most part, devoid of the unremitting nastiness and rage—the vindictive settling of emotional scores—that is so prevalent in the portraits and anti-portraits that Picasso produced in such distressing abundance in the last few decades of his life.

He predicted to Malraux that "his rage would become a prime factor in the style of our time," and he wasn't entirely wrong about that. Yet while Picasso boasted about his "rage," his "rebellion," his "aggressiveness," it continued to bother him that other artists could do without these destructive qualities. Hence his condescending remarks about Braque—the indispensable collaborator in what is for me still the greatest period of Picasso's art—and his repulsive assault on Bonnard. Hence, too, his mixed feelings about Matisse, the only rival he ever considered his equal, an artist he truly greatly admired, yet an artist who—as Picasso knew—remained unafflicted by the rage that came more and more to consume Picasso's own talent and life. But rage also is a formula for the creation of masks—for radical simplification.

In the end, "Picasso and Portraiture" is an exhibition that is far too large for its artistic substance. The rage in Picasso's art is finally deadening, and the sentimentalities of the neoclassical portraits, while always delightful on a first encounter, inevitably pall on closer acquaintance. It was, after all, an enormous risk for him to invite comparison with Ingres. It was a kind of hubris after the achievements of Cubism, and more than anything else it reminds one of Hemingway's silly talk about getting into the ring with Tolstoy. Well, Hemingway clearly lost that contest, and Picasso lost his, too, with Ingres. He lacked the temperament, the detachment, the selflessness, that the classical ideal requires for its ultimate realization. Picasso's classicism is a *faux* classicism, an impersonation, a masquerade in which the artist's preening ego is easily glimpsed. He saved the *Portrait of Gertrude Stein* by abandoning the Ingresque ideal in favor of the anti-classical mask, and the result was extraordinary. When he took up the challenge of Ingres again after the creation of Cubism, much that he produced looks like unintended parody—at times brilliant parody, to be sure, but parody all the same.

The question needs to be asked: How many of the paintings in "Picasso and Portraiture" would continue to sustain our attention if not for our interest in the life of the artist? For a good deal of the public that is bound to flock to this exhibition, the show is tantamount to a Life and Loves movie—and the exhibition is inevitably being promoted to serve that interest. But it isn't only the aesthetically innocent public that now takes this love-life interest in Picasso's art. This approach is now celebrated in the academy and in the museums as well. Writing in the book that accompanies the "Portraiture" exhibition, Professor Robert Rosenblum hails this altered approach to Picasso as a great advance:

> It is something of a jolt to turn back to 1946, the publication date of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.'s *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art*. In his Old Testa-

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> ment of the Picasso literature, a selfless masterpiece of scholarship that laid the foundation stones for the rest of us, one discovers, for example, that Dora Maar is nowhere mentioned as the human inspiration for many of the grotesque portraits discussed in the book's conclusion, but appears only in her cameo roles as photographer of the progressive stages of *Guernica* in 1937 and, later, in 1944, as a reader in one of Picasso's plays, *Le Désir attrapé par la queue*. But perhaps still more surprising today is the fact that Marie-Thérèse Walter does not even figure in Barr's name-studded index. . . . It was only, in fact, in the 1960s, especially with the publication of Françoise Gilot's *Life with Picasso* (1964), that Marie-Thérèse lost her mysterious anonymity, a mythical blond goddess rendered mortal.

For Professor Rosenblum, "the welling profusion of information about Picasso's personal life has also been leavening even familiar works with new layers of meaning that may enrich, rather than adulterate, our experience of the master's art."

Well, nowadays everyone knows the details of all of Picasso's amours, and it wouldn't surprise me to learn that a Broadway musical was even now in preparation on the subject. There will soon be a movie, with Anthony Hopkins, fresh from impersonating a monster in *Nixon*, already hard at work on the monster role in *Picasso*. I don't believe that this "welling profusion of information about Picasso's personal life" does enhance our understanding of where his achievement as an artist really lies. If it did, there wouldn't be quite so many poor paintings—really failed paintings—in the "Picasso and Portraiture" exhibition. There has now emerged an entire literature on Picasso—and not only Picasso, of course—that combines the worst features of prurience and pedantry, a literature of Picasso-envy that found its logical reduction to absurdity in Norman Mailer's recent opus on the subject.

The time may have come to give the whole subject of Picasso a rest for a while, for it is a subject that now seems to corrupt the judgment of the people who are drawn to it. As his old rival Matisse looks larger and larger in his artistic achievement almost year by year, for some of us Picasso's stature diminishes—and no one even pretends to be interested in the private life of Henri Matisse. It is the work that grows on us, not the life or the legend. It's time, in any case, to scrap all this twaddle about the mythical blond goddess—language best left to the Hollywood press agents who invented it—and get back to the art. Unfortunately, "Picasso and Portraiture" fosters precisely the kind of interest in Picasso that acts as a barrier to that task.

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Will there always be an England?

by Roger Kimball

HAMLET: *Ay, marry, why was he sent into England?*
CLOWN: *Why, because 'a was mad. 'A shall recover his wits there; or, if 'a do not, 'tis no great matter there.*
HAMLET: *Why?*
CLOWN: *'Twill not be seen in him there. There the men are as mad as he.*
—Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

I do not know whether any enterprising young graduate student has yet looked into the possibility that Hamlet was suffering from Mad Cow Disease. If not, I offer the idea gratis as a likely ticket to tenure. It would only be necessary to show that greedy, capitalistic cattle farmers were exporting their products a bit earlier than hitherto suspected. Correction: greedy, capitalistic, *and* imperialistic cattle farmers—who were doubtless non-vegetarian smokers, to boot. Think of what might have infested those funeral baked meats coldly furnishing forth the marriage tables! You may not know that Fortinbras, harbinger of a new European Union, actually appears in the last act to oversee the slaughter of infected livestock. Hence the play's closing line: "Go, bid the soldiers shoot."

Of course, the really mad thing about Mad Cow Disease is the furor it has created, especially among other members of the European Union. If it weren't for the British cattle farmers, who have really suffered from the ban, the episode would merely be ludicrous. As it is, the ban on British beef is a perfect example of the (as it were) hamfisted way politically correct bureaucrats in Brussels, dancing to tunes called in Bonn, can be expected to act. Accordingly, when I was in London early in May, I resolved to tuck into some wholesome British beef at the first opportunity as a sort of reverse boycott. My chance came almost immediately when I was invited by a friend to lunch at the Savoy Grill. It's a charming spot. I highly recommend their prime rib of beef, rare, with Yorkshire pudding.

As we discussed the beef ban and other matters pertaining to "Europe"—the familiar shorthand for the proposed redefinition of England as a colony of a German-led European coalition—I wondered whether the Brussels bureaucrats would continue to allow meals such as we were consuming. My friend was enjoying eggs lightly scrambled in butter over smoked salmon. Possibly the health police were even then installing sensors to warn them about tables such as ours where the cholesterol level was woefully unenlightened.

While it is difficult to calculate exactly how intrusive a brave new European world would be, early signs are not encouraging. That very morning *The Daily Telegraph* reported that a European Court had ruled that a council was wrong to sack a college manager who had had a sex-change operation. "Hello, Johnny; from now on you're to address Mr. Jones as Miss Jones."

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Not that left-leaning Brits need lessons in butting into other people's lives. The columnist Minette Marrin, in a hair-raising piece in a subsequent issue of *The Daily Telegraph*, quoted from a document written by one Margaret Hodge, Labour MP for Barking, who argued that "for too long, the early years of a child's life have been seen as the private concern of the parents." Like Hillary Clinton, this zealous public servant wants to get the state into the business of child rearing. In particular, she wants "a comprehensive approach to integrate education and care into a seamless service for children under five" in which the "private sector"—a.k.a. mum and dad—are not too involved. In other words, "it takes a village."

Miss Marrin rightly describes these proposals as "totalitarian" (and "horrendously expensive"). She also notes that when Margaret Hodge was leader of Islington Council and responsible for the upbringing of many children in the care of Islington's childrens' homes, there was "a very nasty scandal" involving sex abuse that was severely criticized in a Government report. Mrs. Hodge eventually admitted that "as far as services for children are concerned, we failed." But that failure has obviously not dimmed her enthusiasm for pontificating. "In her position," Miss Marrin concludes, "I think I might restrain myself from addressing the nation about the state care of children, or about the care of children at all. I think shame might keep me quiet."

Ah, yes: shame. There's not terribly much of that on either side of the Atlantic these days. Not that the current orgy of shamelessness is surprising. The experience of shame presupposes standards of behavior that, being widely acknowledged, bind a community into a moral whole; when one fails to meet such standards, the result is shame. At a time when such standards are in disarray—when they appear arbitrary or merely "personal"—then the sense of shame disintegrates. What remains, however, is not freedom, as some apostles of shamelessness have declared, but a species of self-infatuation among whose salient characteristics are smugness and superficiality.

I had occasion to reflect on this phenomenon one night when I joined several artists and critics for dinner after an opening-night party at a gallery off Cork Street. Conversation at my end of the table, with an artist and two critics, started off decorously with lots of talk about the nature of aesthetic experience and that sort of thing. But matters took a decided turn for the worse when the artist declared that, in his view, Margaret Thatcher ought to be "assassinated" as an act of public benefaction. It didn't help when I announced that I was an avid fan of Lady Thatcher's. From there the exchange rapidly degenerated. Somehow the phrase "British Empire" insinuated itself into the conversation. I made the mistake of speaking up for that, too, observing that there was a lot to be said for imperialism, particularly the British variety, and especially when you considered what a botch most of the former colonies had made of their countries without Western guidance.

Well, that was simply not to be borne. The artist told me that just as no person had the right to impose his values on anyone else, so, too, no culture—especially no benighted Western culture—had the right to impose its values on another culture. What about his wanting to assassinate Lady Thatcher, you wonder? Wouldn't that be a bit of an imposition, at least from her point of view? Apparently that was different. But then what about the many societies in what used to be called the Dark Continent and elsewhere in which female genital mutilation is widespread? Surely Western European societies, with their commitment to universal human rights, had a right, nay an obligation, to intervene where they could to discourage this barbaric practice? At this the female art critic grew thoughtful. But the artist was ready with the evening's *pièce de résistance*. Not only was female genital mutilation no worse or more barbaric than (male) circumcision, he said, it was no worse than an English parent sending his

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children to public (what we would call private) school.

That did momentarily take my breath away. He wasn't serious? Oh, yes, quite serious. He even had an elaborate tale about how English public schools perpetuate an evil, class-ridden, capitalist society: it was right out of central casting. And of course here was a man who was just about to depart for the many bucolic acres of his Hampshire farm and art studio, a welcoming retreat paid for, I gathered, from the sale of aggressively mediocre abstract daubs of the sort I had seen in the gallery exhibition earlier. It was almost enough to make one lament the evils of capitalism.

All this was just business as usual in the world of contemporary culture. But it was nonetheless depressing to recognize once again to what extent the English cultural scene was becoming more and more like the American cultural scene in its attitudes, pretensions, even in its choice of comestibles (though this last might well be an improvement). Every time I go to London now it seems a little less British. There is pressure from "Europe" on England to surrender its legal autonomy, its currency, and important elements of its way of life; there is even greater pressure from beyond Europe from unfettered immigration, which is rapidly changing—perhaps irrevocably—the character of English society; and there is the ubiquitous infiltration of what is euphemistically called American "popular culture," a term that embraces everything from jeans and McDonald's hamburgers to the moral incontinence of an insatiable hedonistic relativism fed by an addiction to the mindless culture of television and rock music. The politicians in Britain, *mirabile dictu*, seem even more feckless than their American counterparts. Absent Margaret Thatcher from power, there doesn't seem to be anyone with sufficient pluck to turn things around. Tony Blair, who almost everyone agrees will be the next prime minister, is a very smooth operator. But on all the essential questions he seems to me to be Labour Party boilerplate gussied up with a certain amount of Tory rhetoric. Scratch the rhetoric, and what you get is capitulation on Europe, equivocation on immigration and questions of "multiculturalism," and collusion with radicalism on most cultural and moral issues.

It may seem unfair to blame America for the degradation of England's cultural life. After all, England gave us The Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and punk rock. Even if their original "inspiration" came from American popular music, the Brits perfected the formula—if "perfected" is the *mot juste*. And readers of the late lamented Kingsley Amis's novels—I am thinking in particular of *Stanley and the Women* and *Girl, 20*—know that English society is every bit as fecund as America in the production of radical left-wing phonies and the virus of political correctness. Would that Sir Kingsley were still here to harry them!

But American influence has been particularly destructive in the area of culture. Several forces, which have been developing at least since the Sixties in the States, have gained an increasing foothold in English culture over the last several years. From the American university, radical multiculturalism, political correctness, and what has come to be called "cultural studies" have become an ever more prominent part of English academic life. Again, there were plenty of native-born examples of such phenomena (the term "cultural studies" as currently used in the academy may even be English in origin). But the triumph of such forces in American intellectual life has given these phenomena a tremendous boost in England. It was not so long ago that English institutions such as the BBC and Oxbridge largely held the line against the rising tide of demotic culture. Now the BBC is an *echt* correct institution that goes to great lengths to find announcers who do not speak what used to be called "BBC English" and that regularly capitulates to the lowest common denominator in cultural as well as political matters. And even the great Eng-

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lish universities seem to be doing everything possible to jettison their great heritage in order to achieve the intellectual mediocrity and political silliness of their American counterparts. The appointment of the Marxist critic Terry Eagleton to the Warton chair at Oxford a few years ago was merely one symptom of the trend.

A curious dialectic stands behind and nourishes these developments. On the one hand, intellectuals are busy conducting a kind of love affair with pop culture, expending great energy analyzing the significance of TV soap operas, pulp fiction, and the lyrics of rock music. All this is conducted in the name of establishing a kind of parity between high culture and pop culture. If the backs of cereal boxes can support the same sort of hermeneutical ingenuity as a play by Shakespeare, then aren't they really the same sort of thing: cultural "discourses" between which it would be invidious, or at least elitist, to draw any hard and fast distinctions? On the other hand, quite apart from this equalizing pressure, there is also a levelling pressure, which presses inexorably downward. If there is no fundamental distinction between a Bach chorale and, say, the latest offering from Niggaz With Attitude, then not only is rap "music" reborn as a species of art music, but Bach suffers a demotion, being reincarnated as a form of entertainment that, like all forms of entertainment, must compete in the marketplace for clients. The effect on both is disastrous. Pop culture is endowed with pretensions it cannot support; high culture is burdened with populist demands it cannot meet without serious adulteration.

This assault on culture has proceeded very far in America; it has done incalculable damage not only to those institutions charged with preserving the legacy of high culture—universities, museums, symphony orchestras, and the like—but also to the myriad institutions in which contemporary popular culture is born and disseminated. Indeed, it is hard to know which is worse, the perversion of high culture or the descent of popular culture into the gutter. Until recently, I should have said that things were not quite so bad in England as here, but clearly the forces of cultural tawdriness in London have been playing an aggressive game of catch-up.

In some ways, theatrical and musical life are still in better shape in London than here, despite the ubiquity of pap by Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber in the West End. (It is a pity, as one wit recently observed to me, that we in America do not have a device like Britain's honors list with which to enshrine certain forms of cultural fatuousness: imagine, Sir Robert Mapplethorpe, Dame Maya Angelou—the prospect really is delicious.) In the art world, though, things are every bit as bad in London as in New York. We may have David Ross at the Whitney Museum of American Art and Thomas Krens at the Guggenheim, but Londoners have Nick Serrota at the Tate and Norman Rosenthal at the Royal Academy. The prospect of choosing among them reminds one of Doctor Johnson's response when asked who was worse, Voltaire or Rousseau. "Sir," he replied, "it is not for me to apportion the degree of inequity between a louse and a flea." The Tate, at any rate, has all but totally capitulated to the anti-art art brigades: that is, to those who combine with equal ferocity a passion for consumerism with a taste for the meretricious.

Even the National Gallery, alas, despite the presence of some excellent and level-headed curators, is beginning to succumb. While I was in London, a charming little exhibition of paintings from the Doria Pamphilj Gallery in Rome was on view at the National Gallery. It included masterpieces by Titian and Raphael, and Velázquez's spectacular *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*. Apparently, such great works of art were not considered a sufficient draw, for on May 1 the exhibition was supplemented by four paintings of Popes and Cardinals by England's greatest painter of raw meat, Francis Bacon. Although he never actually saw Velázquez's painting of Pope Innocent X, Bacon nonetheless has proclaimed that it

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was (as reported by a press release) "one of the greatest portraits ever made and that he was attracted by the magnificent colour." (Thanks be to Kodak.) His own paintings in the exhibition were "inspired" by the Velázquez in the sense that they offer disdainful, characteristically distorted parodies of the stern original. The conflation of Bacon and Velázquez—the repugnant and the sublime—by the National Gallery was a deeply cynical maneuver to increase attendance and garner a little PR. But its predictable effect was, once again, to cheapen high art and illegitimately elevate the second-rate. Of course, the Bacons looked positively preposterous next to those old masters; but they did manage to render the whole exhibition ridiculous.

In London, as in the States, however, the most virulent precincts of the art world lie mostly outside the penumbra of institutions like the National Gallery. One thinks, for example, of the notorious Damien Hirst, whose formaldehyde-preserved animal carcasses represent the really dangerous outbreak of Mad Cow Disease in London and which only recently were allowed by health authorities into the United States. The worst example of this sort of thing in London at the moment is probably the "sculpture" of Jake and Dinos Chapman. These thirty-something brothers started as assistants to that other pair of art-world hucksters, Gilbert and George, whose latest effort, the *Naked Shit Pictures*, consisted of stylized photographs of the dynamic duo surrounded by images of (presumably) their own excrement. Of course, this tasteless travesty was celebrated by much of the London art world in terms befitting a religious revelation.

I am not certain whether it is possible to be worse than Gilbert and George. But the Chapman brothers have certainly done their best to outdo their mentors, both in the rebarbative nature of their productions and the pretentious verbiage with which they proffer it to the public. One of their first collaborations was a pornographic movie. Now, in an exhibition called "Chapman-world" at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Pall Mall—in a beautiful building designed by John Nash, God help him—the brothers were displaying their wares: mannequins of seven- or eight-year-old girls that had been mutilated or otherwise "updated" to fulfill the Chapman's twisted fantasies. Here is one critic's description:

> The sculptures have adult genitals, but in the wrong places. A vagina replaces an eye or anus, extends a mouth or nestles in the join between two hips. . . . A mannequin riding a child centaur holds on to the penises projecting, like horns, from its head. To anchor them in reality—so they can most effectively assault notions of good taste—the sculptures wear wigs and sneakers.

Other mannequins are displayed with various appendages ripped off, with super-realistic wounds in their place. One is hung from the ceiling and has fake blood dripping from several wounds. Quoth Jake about these objects: "Anyone shocked by our work must be disgusted at themselves." And Dinos: "The masses are so uneducated. They shouldn't go into galleries—galleries should be means tested."

Naturally, one feels uneasy even describing such pathological garbage for fear that the notice will encourage more of the same. But the Chapmans, like Gilbert and George, represent a growth industry. Their "sculptures" are fetching upwards of £30,000, they have had an exhibition at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (another casualty of the culture wars), and many English critics have swooned over their art: one calls it "brilliant," another praises it for dealing "with the commodification of desire and the impasses of critique," while a third commends its "high stakes" struggle with important issues.

Will there always be an England? I hope so. But the combined forces of political acquiescence and accelerating cultural decadence make it a dubious proposition all around.

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La Rochefoucauld: maximum maximist

by Joseph Epstein

François VI, Duc de La Rochefoucauld (1613–1680) did not invent the form known as the maxim, but instead, fairly early in its history, merely perfected it. Defying any notion of progress in the arts, nobody has come along in more than three centuries who has done it better; he remains unsurpassed. "We all have strength enough to endure the misfortunes of others," he wrote, and later, not gilding but crushing the lily, he added: "We are easily consoled for the misfortunes of our friends, if they afford us an opportunity of displaying our affection." He also wrote that "hypocrisy is the homage that vice pays to virtue" and that "however much good we hear of ourselves, we never learn anything new." Bull's-eyes, all of them, but then La Rochefoucauld hits the target more than any other writer of maxims in the history of the form, making him, beyond all argument, the maximum maximist.

The taste for maxims is rather like that for oysters: a taste for something sharp, faintly metallic, a pleasure brief but memorable, leaving an aftertaste (afterthought) and causing a felicitous ping to go off at the back of the throat (head). Epigrams, aphorisms, apothegms, maxims, there is a small problem of nomenclature here, but scarcely an intolerable one. The element common to all is economy of thought, the objective to say more by saying less. The point is to place a few well-chosen words in a perfect order, giving it at once an elegant shape, with sound and sense nicely meshed, paradox highlighted, truthfulness (not quite the same as the truth) reigning, and, with luck, a piquant touch of wisdom emerging.

Maxims are condensed essays, or at any rate each might stand as the last sentence of an excellent essay. They are written in the same grammatical tense in which paintings are painted, in what Richard G. Hodgson, in *Falsehood Disguised*,[1] his excellent recent study of La Rochefoucauld, calls "the eternal present." In the composition of maxims, economy is of the essence; behind each is, or ought to be, the spirit of Hazlitt's saying that "a thought must tell quickly or not at all." Meant to give form to the most elusive and often paradoxical of truths, maxims are also meant to endure, which means that they must be pitched at a high level of generality and not be lashed to the time and place of their composition.

Nietzsche, who himself favored the maxim in *Human, All Too Human* and other works, held La Rochefoucauld's writing in the highest regard; so, too, did Voltaire, who claimed that no other book did more to form the literary taste of the French than La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes*. Schopenhauer, who also wrote maxims, almost always quotes La Rochefoucauld approvingly. Gide thought that he had carried the

1 *Falsehood Disguised: Unmasking the Truth in La Rochefoucauld*, by Richard G. Hodgson; Purdue University Press, 176 pages, $29.95.

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form to *perfection* (his italics). Rousseau, it will perhaps surprise no one to learn, felt that La Rochefoucauld was working the wrong vein, with "*son triste livre*." But then La Rochefoucauld would have thought Rousseau's ideas, not least the social contract, overly, if not comically, simplified. The only contract every man has is with himself, as La Rochefoucauld frequently pointed out, and he can usually be relied upon not to keep even that.

The great writers of maxims labor under the reputation of pessimism, if not cynicism. Some have been pessimists and cynics both. The best, as always, evade labels of any kind. Yet there is little doubt that a certain world-weariness attracts people to the writing of maxims. It is an older man's form—few women have published maxims—probably best not written much before fifty and not read much until after forty, when one has had the chance to test the waters (tepid, salty) of life.

In defense of the dourness of most successful maxims, it could be said that cheerfulness in literature, if not in life, does not travel well. The quickest way for a maxim to become a platitude is for it to attempt to glorify men or women or even hold out some hope for the human race. Consider "Love conquers all," which began life as a maxim and ended, where it resides today, in the nursing home of clichés. More in the spirit of maxim writing, on the same subject, is E. M. Cioran's "Love is an agreement on the part of two people to over-estimate each other."

The Cioran maxim can no more be proved than a statement expressing the opposite sentiment, but it does tantalize in the way maxims, when they succeed, tend to do. Cioran's maxim may not be the truth, but it contains sufficient truth to provoke further thought on the subject. A successful maxim tells the truth, and nothing but the truth, but it does not, it really cannot, tell the whole truth. The implications of such truth—perhaps revelation is the better word here—as a maxim delivers must be weighed and worked out by the person reading it. Does the maxim fit one's own case? Have the women who have loved me had to over-estimate me in order to do so, and in precisely what ways? Anyone else here beginning to feel the room getting a bit warm?

Maximists are psychologists not philosophers, anatomists not biologists. They describe rather than prescribe, dissect rather than connect. The word *moralist* best captures what they are, though not all moralists wrote maxims. No moralizer, the moralist propounds neither an ethics nor a morality, at least not directly. His claims are limited to telling his readers why men and women —and the moralists almost all delighted in the attempt to fathom women—behave as they do. In so doing, he rarely invokes the religious or the metaphysical; instead he is content to peel back false assumptions and asseverations in the hope of revealing true feelings and motives. "Mankind," wrote La Rochefoucauld, "may be said to be a mere mass of poses." The moralist's task is to discover what lies behind them.

Idealism, it all but goes without saying, is no part of the equipment of the moralist. Any impulse toward the romantic in him must be strangled. All illusions must be rooted out, including—here's the rub—the illusion that we can live without illusions. Illusion is for the human race the *spécialité de la maison*. Perhaps the greatest of these illusions is that we can steer a steady course of virtue through our lives, with victorious recognition of our goodness arriving at the end. On this illusion alone any moralist worth his vinegar could make a career. If I may be permitted a maxim of my own devising: Most of us think our lives a tragedy for which life will supply a happy ending rather than, what for most of us is much more likely the case, a farce with a tragic ending.

A farce with a tragic ending comes close, I suspect, to the way La Rochefoucauld viewed his own life. From his brilliant beginning there was no clue that it would turn out that way. His gifts, both natural and acquired, were prodigious. He was

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handsome, gracious, witty. He was a first-born son, and hence first in line for his father's title and estates. (Until the death of his father, in 1650, he was the Prince de Marsillac.) Like other young aristocrats under the reign of Louis XIII, La Rochefoucauld, though married (as was not uncommon then) at fourteen, observed the breathtaking complexity of status and its ritual at court and, joining in the general skirt chase of the day, attempted, with some success, to sleep above himself. Women were always at the center of his life, except, it seems, for his wife, who bore him seven children and was apparently content to be one of those persons lost in the mists of history.

If there is a pattern in La Rochefoucauld's early life, it is perhaps to be found in his penchant for beautiful women who themselves had a stronger penchant for intrigue than for him. At the courts of Louis XIII and Louis XIV, intrigue was more thickly in the air than sexual innuendo at a conference of psychoanalysts. A foreign queen, Anne of Austria, unloved by her frivolous husband, Louis XIII, caused the royal court to be divided between her and Cardinal Richelieu, whom the King was all too ready to let rule France while he played games, made jams, and mimicked the grimaces of men on their deathbeds. La Rochefoucauld sided with Queen Anne, which was the wrong, because the losing, side. (And only winning and losing, nothing in the way of principles, seemed really at stake.) He himself took up the Queen's part chiefly because of his attraction to the Duchesse de Chevreuse, who was one of the Queen's confidants. In time, of course, the Duchesse de Chevreuse and the Queen would argue, leaving La Rochefoucauld in his accustomed position of odd man out.

Easily the most elegant book written about La Rochefoucauld is Morris Bishop's *The Life and Adventures of La Rochefoucauld* (1951). In 273 pages, Bishop provides an account of his subject's life, while recounting the intricacies of the two French civil wars that went by the name of the Frondes along with other, manifold conspiracies and gracefully interweaving no fewer than 242 of La Rochefoucauld's maxims into the work. A book in the best scholarly-belletristic tradition, it is immensely useful in taking its readers gently through the maze of French court life and the super-subtle machinations of some of the most delicate operators the world has ever known. Princes ride off to war, their servants carrying gold dishes and hampers filled with exquisite wines and poultry—a man has to eat, after all, and why not elegantly? Men fight and die, but court conspiracies turn out to be of greater consequence than campaigns afield. Three of the shrewdest Cardinals the world has ever known—Richelieu, Mazarin, Retz—take a hand in geopolitical poker, playing with countries for chips. Advancement, self-aggrandizement, acquisition of personal power, these seemed to be the chief points in a dangerous but otherwise pointless game.

His mind muddled by his youthful romanticism, La Rochefoucauld had not the subtlety or perhaps the strength of character to play with these men, though take a hand he did. Cardinal de Retz, with whom at various times he was variously aligned and at loggerheads, wrote in his memoirs of La Rochefoucauld that he could have been "the most polished courtier of his time and the man of the highest principle in regard to public affairs," but instead he was "ambitious to be mixed up in political intrigues" when he had "no knowledge of affairs of state." He had, according to Retz, an abundance of common sense, though "he did not display this quality in practical affairs"; and he was irresolute. "A fine soldier, he made no reputation in war. He never succeeded by his own efforts as a courtier. . . . He was never a successful politician, though he engaged in politics throughout his life." In short, La Rochefoucauld was a bust-out, a brilliant bust-out to be sure, but still a bust-out. La Rochefoucauld himself, one suspects, would not greatly have disagreed.

No need to rehearse all the endlessly intricate conspiracies through which La

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Rochefoucauld put himself over a more than twenty-year life of political intriguing. Sufficient, I think, to say that he came out a loser: without the love of the Duchesse de Longueville, sister of the Prince de Condé and the Prince de Conti, the woman he ardently pursued and with whom he shared an illegitimate son, whom he is said to have loved more than his sons by marriage; without his health, which he lost when he took a musket ball full in the face at the age of forty at the battle of Faubourg Saint-Antoine that cost him the loss of one eye and permanent disfigurement; without his estates intact (they were saved only by the perspicacity of a former servant, one M. Gourville, a sensible Sancho Panza to his rather hare-brained Don Quixote, who made wise investments for him); and without, finally, ever satisfying that vast romantic ambition that ended in destroying his body and cankering his soul.

The excellent Professor Bishop describes La Rochefoucauld at the end of the second Fronde, in 1653: "La Rochefoucauld, just turned forty, recognized by his dimmed eyesight, by the gouty pains of his body, that his active life was over." Ah, but his literary life, which would bring him much greater fame than his political activism at its most successful could ever have done, was just about to begin. He was not a man to take succor in religion, to shore up his ruins in piety. Morris Bishop again: "He was essentially a faithless man, unmystical, unbending to God. The zeal of the pious seemed to him vulgar, even disgusting." Instead he took to wisdom literature—Seneca & Co.—first to reading it, then to writing it. La Rochefoucauld the dreamer and La Rochefoucauld the intriguer were now done for. "The third La Rochefoucauld," as Bishop writes, "will be only the spectator, looking at the world with dimmed, wounded eyes."

It was in writing his memoirs, self-justifying and therefore not very distinguished memoirs, that La Rochefoucauld discovered his pleasure in prose. In a self-portrait, he wrote that, though he possessed "language fairly well, though I have a good memory and can think without confusion, I am still so bound to my sulky humor that I often express badly what I mean." He added that "the conversation of cultivated people is one of the pleasures I enjoy most." He might have qualified that by adding that he enjoyed the conversation of intelligent women most of all—"it seems to me that they explain themselves with more acuteness, and they give a more agreeable turn to their words"—and that he was fortunate in finding it in the salons first of Mme. de Rambouillet and then, more decisively, in that of Mme. de Sablé, the latter a confidant of Pascal.

Much has been written about the language games played at these salons, where extreme politesse was professed and no less extreme gossip practiced. At Mme. de Sablé's what was known as the proverb game was frequently played. In this game, one of the guests set out an observation on human behavior, usually in epigrammatic form, which all the guests then fell to criticizing, honing, and polishing, usually in the direction of ever more concise formulation. Many of these exercises were on La Rochefoucauld's *maximes*, as he called them, some of which he himself is said to have rewritten as many as thirty times.

La Rochefoucauld's maxims were pirated by a Dutch publisher, who in 1665 bound together 316 of them, without putting their author's name on the title page, though most people who read the slender volume seemed to know his identity. At its first appearance, the book scandalized many. Mme. de La Fayette, who was later to become La Rochefoucauld's great good friend, upon first reading his maxims reported to Mme. de Sévigné: "Ah, Madame! quelle corruption il faut avoir dans l'espirit et dans le coeur pour être capable d'imaginer tout cela." It was as if the Misanthrope himself had written *Tartuffe*, and in fact Sainte-Beuve says that La Rochefoucauld's *Réflexions ou sentences et maximes morales*, as the book was titled, "delightfully prepared the

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way for that other Misanthrope," of Molière, which was first mounted the following year (1666).

Its readers might have argued about the truth quotient in La Rochefoucauld's book, but no one disputed its high style. "People read the little volume eagerly," Voltaire wrote, "it accustomed them to think, and to enclose their thoughts in a lively, precise and delicate form. This was a merit no one had had before him in Europe since the renascence of letters." Sainte-Beuve adds that La Rochefoucauld "has the clearness and conciseness of phrase that Pascal alone, in that century, had before him."

The first temptation is to conclude that it is chiefly because of what life had dealt out to him that La Rochefoucauld became the kind of writer he did. "The maxims were the revenge of the Romance," writes Sainte-Beuve. He takes this a step further, writing that his maxims "please whoever has had his Fronde and a musket-shot between the eyes." Taken together the two remarks imply that not only does one have to have suffered to have written so darkly as La Rochefoucauld but one has to have suffered one's share even to enjoy reading him. Suffering perhaps helps, but having kept one's eyes open helps even more.

Doubtless La Rochefoucauld would not have written as he had if life had turned out other than it did for him. Life dealt him a fine hand, which he overplayed. Still, he earned his worldly wisdom, as he watched all of his illusions sour in the brine of disappointment. But to say that the *Maximes* are the work of a disappointed man in order to disqualify them is, I think, a great mistake. Quite as great a mistake is it to claim that one has to be disappointed oneself to be enamored of them, though if La Rochefoucauld could be guaranteed a readership of only one percent of those disappointed in life, the *Maximes*, I think it safe to say, would vastly outsell the Bible.

The test of the worth of La Rochefoucauld is not to be found in his biography, but in ours—in the discovery of just how self-revealing to us his revelations are. A peek here—just a small one—into my own heart, where, perhaps shocking to report, the skies are not sunny all day. A month or so ago, I learned that a man I have not seen for more than thirty years died, of cancer. He was not yet sixty. I scarcely knew him; I dare say, had we met on the street, he would not have recognized me. I might have recognized him, for as a young man he was very handsome, devastatingly so. I was once at a party with him with a woman I loved; she, it was very clear, was attracted to him, as was perhaps every other woman in the room. So far as I know, she did nothing about it; nor did he. I have not seen this woman for nearly thirty years either. Still, when I learned of this man's death, my first feeling—a fleeting feeling, but, let me assure you, a very real one—was the feeling of pleasure. Why? La Rochefoucauld covers the case. "Jealousy," he writes, "is born with love, but does not always die with it."

Let me delve just a bit further here, with La Rochefoucauld as my guide. Why did I take instant pleasure in this man's death, a man who had caused me no harm, if he even ever thought of me at all. The great moralist would have no difficulty in supplying the answer. *Amour-propre* was entailed, he would say; *amour-propre* was behind my jealousy, even over a love about which I no longer cared in the least. This handsome man represented a threat to my *amour-propre*; in his good looks he held the potential power to humiliate me, or at any rate once held such power. Better, my *amour-propre* tells me, that this man should be dead. Stupid, horrible, vile, but, alas, there it is.

The notion (idea? discovery?) of *amour-propre* is central to La Rochefoucauld's thought. In the richness of its possibilities, *amour-propre* makes our old buddy the ego seem a piker indeed. To define *amour-propre* is only to describe it, but not truly to account for the insidiousness and grandeur of its powers. *Amour-propre* has been variously defined as self-regard, self-love, self-interest, self-respect. In the first of his supplementary

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maxims, La Rochefoucauld describes it, in part, thus:

> *Amour-propre* is the love of oneself and of all other things for one's own sake; it makes men idolize themselves and would cause them to tyrannize over their neighbors had they the opportunity. . . . Nothing equals the impetuosity of its desires, the depths of its schemes, or the ingenuity of its methods. . . . It is impossible to fathom the depths or pierce the gloom of the abyss in which it dwells. . . . There it conceives, breeds, and rears, unknowingly, a vast number of appetites and dislikes—some of so monstrous a shape that it fails to recognize them when exposed to the light of day, or cannot bring itself to own them. Out of the night that covers it are born the absurd ideas it entertains of itself; thence come its errors, its ignorance, its clumsiness, and its fatuous beliefs about itself—its notion that its feelings are dead when they are but asleep, that it has lost its activity when once it is at rest, and that it has got rid of the appetites it has for the moment appeased.

For La Rochefoucauld, *amour-propre* was not some intellectual construct, as the ego is for Freud, but a psycho-biological fact. To be human is to have *amour-propre*; to have *amour-propre* is to be imprisoned by it; yet to understand that one is in fact imprisoned does not ever quite set one free. In one of his maxims, La Rochefoucauld wrote: "*Amour-propre* is responsible for more cruelty than natural ferocity." Yet, he also suggested that *amour-propre*, in its devious way, was responsible for much of the good men accomplish.

In its subtlety, *amour-propre* makes Freudianism and Marxism seem the intellectual equivalent of small change. With his emphasis on sex, Freud makes the world seem so much chasing after the brief spasm at the end of sexual conquest, though who exactly has conquered whom in this scheme is in actual practice never all that clear; with his emphasis on economics, Marx makes the world seem so much chasing after gold, which doesn't make for much of a story, especially after one has piled up a vast quantity of it and finds one is still unhappy. But what is behind both pursuits, and many others into the bargain, La Rochefoucauld would say, is that strange, restless, perverse imp-villain-hero, *amour-propre*.

Straight out of the gate, in Maxim 1, La Rochefoucauld reports that, in the ethical realm, appearances and realities generally are not what they seem: "What we take for virtues are often merely a collection of different acts and personal interests pieced together by chance or our own ingenuity and it is not always because of valor or chastity that men are valiant or women chaste." Nothing is pure; most acts are a mélange of motives in which virtue and vice mix, so that "vices are ingredients of virtue, just as poisons are ingredients of medicine." What is more: "We should often blush for our noblest deeds if the world could see all the motives which underlay them." Selflessness and disinterest dissolve before the elusive genius of *amour-propre*. "Self-interest speaks all manner of tongues and plays all manner of parts, even that of disinterest." *Amour-propre*, as La Rochefoucauld notes, is like "the eye that can see everything but itself."

La Rochefoucauld would not have been much of a hit at the Hallmark Cards company in Kansas City, Missouri. "All human life is sunk deep in untruth," said Nietzsche in *Human, All Too Human*, and La Rochefoucauld took it as his job to show just how deep the untruth goes. In his study, Professor Hodgson writes: "The task of the moralist, as La Rochefoucauld conceived and practiced it, is to look behind the veil of appearances, to unmask the passions and prejudices being disguised as positive moral values. A whole range of attitudes and qualities traditionally associated with a strong sense of morality . . . are revealed in the *Maximes* as mere cover or camouflage for much baser instincts."

La Rochefoucauld's tendency is to find those infected spots in our moral constitution—vanity, pride, cowardice, envy, self-

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congratulation—and, with the sharp prick of a maxim, let the pus out of them. Whatever one prides oneself upon—loyalty, humility, courage, magnanimity—La Rochefoucauld can show that not very far beneath the surface of these professions lies self-love and personal ambition. Even civility—"Civility to others arises from a desire to receive it in return, and be accounted well-bred"—is suspect. Pity is not much better: "Pity is often a sense of personal calamity aroused by the calamities of others. It is a subtle insurance against possible adversity." As for generosity, it is "generally mere pride of giving, which we value more than the thing we give." And of course no profession is more to be distrusted than love: "In none of the passions does selfishness play so great a part as in love; we are always ready to sacrifice the comfort of those we love rather than our own," and "In the pursuit of women nothing plays a smaller part than love."

In Randall Jarrell's novel *Pictures at an Institution*, one of the principal characters is accused of hypocrisy, to which the novel's narrator responds by saying that he cannot be accused of hypocrisy since he hasn't as yet reached the stage of moral development to know right from wrong. Just so in La Rochefoucauld, where most of us sleepwalk through life, with our grand attitudes and high principles, which we like to think we can retain through the knocks life so generously hands out. It is not that we are hypocrites; it is that where we are not blinded by *amour-propre*, our passions and the forceful, often brutal, coercions of fortune kick in. W. G. Moore, who has written perhaps the best book on La Rochefoucauld's thought,[2] remarks that in his pages man is "seen as a creature more impotent than wicked, as impotent to do good rather than intent to do evil." For La Rochefoucauld, inconstancy is perhaps the only constant in human existence.

Moore maintains that La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes* "speak less of false virtue than of mixed virtue," for "as *amour-propre* is insatiable, so is it incalculable." This it is that makes La Rochefoucauld no simple cynic, but something richer, deeper. He is the first writer to have a true respect for the role of chance and timing in human affairs. Nor does he forget the role that simple laziness plays in our fate, especially mental laziness: "The mind is more indolent than the body." His taste for paradox, which runs through the maxims, is very strong: "Nothing makes it so difficult to be natural as the desire to be so." Everywhere he finds the spectacle of people acting against their professions, against their interests, against all logic—yes, finally, even against their sense of what they believe to be their own *amour-propre*. In the end, "Our enemies' opinion of us is nearer the truth than our own."

A Mme. de Shomberg, in a letter to Mme. de Sablé after reading La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes*, wrote: "In this work there is a great deal of wit, very little goodness, and many truths of which I would have been ignorant all my life had I not been made to see them." But is it so that La Rochefoucauld's book contains "very little goodness"? I don't believe it is, even though the preponderance of his maxims are devoted to unmaskings: of false motives, false feeling, false virtues. Beneath the flash of penetration into human pretension, apart from the portrayal of human absurdity, there is in the *Maximes* an attempt to discover what is authentic, and hence dignified and serious, in human beings. Because of the organization of the book, which sometimes presents maxims back-to-back as if in argument, but more often spreads maxims on the same subject thirty and forty pages apart, the search for the authentic that is at the heart of La Rochefoucauld's book goes astray.

Authenticity in La Rochefoucauld, Professor Hodgson remarks, is a "combination of lucidity, sincerity, and internal harmony" and "is a rare phenomenon indeed." La Rochefoucauld's views on authenticity are

2 See Moore's 1969 study, *La Rochefoucauld: His Mind and Art* (Oxford University Press).

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discovered in a handful of maxims and through latching onto the reverse of those qualities he chooses to mock. Professor Hodgson notes that "*l'être vrai* is thus an ideal toward which we must all strive, but one which most of us will never attain, given the illusory nature of the world around us, the unpredictability of human nature, and the elusive character of truth itself." This *être vrai*, or true being or genuine person, is someone who attains as much lucidity about his own motives and those of people he deals with as possible—no easy achievement when everything in society encourages the perpetuation of falsehoods, the exchange of lies, and the proliferation of illusions. Life in society—ours no less than La Rochefoucauld's—is predicated on most people seeming to be what they are not.

As Maxim 62 has it, "Sincerity comes directly from the heart. One finds it in very few people; what one usually finds is but a deft pretense designed to gain the confidence of others." *L'être vrai* combines in La Rochefoucauld with *l'honnête homme*, the true gentleman, who lives without pretension. Such a man has no need for pretension. "It is a sign of true goodness to be willing to live always in the sight of good men"—just as "the truly honest man is without conceit" and "lives in public as he does in private." Still, make no mistake, to live with such lucidity and in such harmony is all but impossible.

What with the maelstrom of self-love and self-interest in which we live, the added force of the passions that addle our minds, the banging about that the winds of fortune subject us to—"The world is ruled by chance and caprice"—nothing is more difficult, in La Rochefoucauld's view, than correct judgment. Our youth is "*une ivresse perpetuelle*"; yet we arrive at each successive stage of life "*tout nouveaux*." It was La Rochefoucauld who, in Maxim 444, invented that by now oldest of truisms, which has almost the status of folk wisdom, "There is no fool like an old fool." As for the cool wisdom of old age, it was La Rochefoucauld who wrote that "we do not desert our appetites, it is our appetites that desert us."

Given our talent for self-deception—and self-deception is the true theme of the *Maximes*—what chance has any of us to live less than clownishly? La Rochefoucauld posits two possibilities: the rare hope that one can win one's way through to good judgment and the hope, against all hope, that one can find peace in one's heart. "The greatest of all gifts is the power to estimate things at their true worth," he wrote. Yet here the trap is that one can just as easily be too clever, too subtle: "The chief fault of the penetrative mind is not failure to go deep enough, but going too deep," and "It is of the subtlest wisdom that the subtlest folly is begotten." As for living in peace, "If a man cannot find peace in his heart, it is useless to seek it elsewhere." Leave it to La Rochefoucauld to hold out a slender thread of hope, then withdraw it.

All this might be made simpler if we could just assume the worst about ourselves, and play on through from here. But, alas, even this is not so. Good and evil, like vice and virtue, are mixed and admixed. Even "selfishness, which we blame for all our crimes, often deserves to be praised for our good deeds." Meanwhile, *amour-propre* works its devious way, "joins forces with those who attack it, takes part in their schemes, and, marvelous though it may appear, shares their hatred of itself, conspires for its own defeat, and labors for its own ruin; in a word, it cares only to exist, and, provided it exists, is content to be its own enemy." In short and in sum: "Imagination cannot conceive such a medley of inconsistencies as nature has planted in every heart."

In *The Unquiet Grave*, Cyril Connolly writes: "Those who are consumed with curiosity about other people but who do not love them should write maxims, for no one can become a novelist who does not love his fellow-man." Tell it, one is tempted to say in response to this statement, to Céline. Yet, such is the richness and com-

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plexity of La Rochefoucauld's view of mankind, that it is to the great novelists that one most readily compares him. With his requirement for lucidity and judgment as the only, if always slight, hope for mankind, he is reminiscent of no one so much as Henry James with his invocation to try to be someone on "whom nothing is lost." La Rochefoucauld wrote that "it is easier to understand mankind in general than any individual man," to which James, across the centuries, responds in agreement: "Never say you know the last word about any human heart." With his grasp of the contradictions that reside in the human heart, as the brilliant anatomist of love, jealousy, and envy, La Rochefoucauld is the proper predecessor of Proust, whose vast novel often reads like nothing quite so much as La Rochefoucauld's 123 pages fleshed out in more than three thousand.

But especially do the *Maximes* seem to anticipate Joseph Conrad who, in *Lord Jim*, has Marlow remark that "it is my belief no man ever understands quite his own artful dodges to escape from the grim shadow of self-knowledge." It is Conrad who, in a letter to Edward Garnett, wrote that "when once the truth is grasped that one's own personality is only a ridiculous and aimless masquerade of something hopelessly unknown, the attainment of serenity is not very far off." In *Victory*, Conrad has his protagonist Alex Heyst aver that he is finished with the moralists, but of course Heyst, wrong about his hope of living without illusions, is wrong about this, too.

Although the moralist would seem to present his readers with what Roland Barthes, writing about La Rochefoucauld, calls "a nightmare of truth," there is something revivifying about reading him. If the drama of human life is to be found in the struggle between egotism and altruism—and La Rochefoucauld, let it be said, is light on the side of exploring the mysteries of the latter—he is nonetheless impressive in his own search for understanding. A man standing up to speak for truth is always a grand spectacle. And when he does so with consummate style, as La Rochefoucauld unfailingly does, it is all the grander.

"The mark of the maxim is form," as W. G. Moore noted, adding that "by form we mean obvious and pleasing shape, a recurrence of sounds and a harmonious grouping of syllables." Moore also points out that most of La Rochefoucauld's maxims convey neither a fact nor an opinion but a relation and that very few of the maxims make absolute statements. Many are aptly qualified: such words as "sometimes," "often," and "most people" crop up time and again; La Rochefoucauld is master of the *ne . . . que* formulation. His metaphors are few, deft, and never draw attention from the main thought. The artfulness in the *Maximes* is both in their economy and the wide range of meaning their few words provoke. Even his ambiguities—the precise meanings of his use of such words as *honnête*, *esprit*, *merité*, *coeur*, and others—seem to work in his favor, causing Nietzsche, for example, to admire the combination of precision and suggestiveness in La Rochefoucauld, the two nicely blended by an overlay of paradox.

If one wanted to display a not merely characteristic but perfect La Rochefoucauld maxim, one could do worse than choose Maxim 26: "La soleil ni la mort ne se peuvent regarder fixment." ("Neither the sun nor death can be looked upon steadily.") "This is," as Odette De Mourgues writes in *Two French Moralists* (La Bruyère is the other in this study), "perfect communication." And so it is: it has lovely sound, good sense, a touch of poetry, an air of paradox, and—an additional bonus—truthfulness of a revelatory kind and of a very high quotient.

La Rochefoucauld on death is appealing for its author's utter absence of softening nonsense. In his self-portrait, he tells us that he is "not apprehensive, and has absolutely no fear of death." But in Maxim 504, which is nearly as lengthy as his maxim on *amour-propre*, his tells another, more persuasive story. Here he reports on "the unreality of

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the contempt for death." Although some meet death bravely, no one, he believes, ever despises death, at least not genuinely so. It is "the greatest of all calamities," and "any man who sees it in its true aspect knows how terrifying it is." If we think our reason will stand us in good stead as death approaches, we do better to think again, for "on the contrary, it is reason which generally betrays us, and instead of inspiring contempt for death, reveals to us all its most terrifying horrors."

Before La Rochefoucauld had to face this most democratic of terrors, he found the greatest peace and pleasure he would ever know in his life in the company of Mme. de La Fayette. She was a woman nineteen years younger than he—he was fifty-two, she thirty-three when they joined forces—and described by Boileau as "the woman of the most mind in France and the best writer." She was the author of *Princesse de Cléves*, on which La Rochefoucauld is said to have worked with her. In later years, she remarked of their partnership: "M. de La Rochefoucauld gave me a mind, but I have reformed his heart." Each in his and her poor health fell back upon the other for support—and found it, to the highest degree. "Their ill health," Mme. de Sévigné wrote to her daughter, "made them necessary to each other, and . . . gave them leisure to taste their good qualities, which is not the case in other liaisons. . . . I believe that no passion can exceed in strength such an intimacy." The man who would be famous for mocking the purity of love had, it seems, himself found it in its purest form.

It is good to learn that, with his full cognizance of the terror of death, he proved among those who faced it bravely. Mme. de Sévigné reports of La Rochefoucauld on his deathbed that "it is not in vain my daughter that he did so much thinking all his life; approaching his last hours on earth in the same manner, they held nothing strange for him." After his death, Mme. de Sévigné asked her daughter, "Where will Mme. de La Fayette find another such friend, such society, such gentleness, pleasantness, confidence, and consideration for her and her son?"

La Rochefoucauld's Maxim 473 reads: "True love may be rare, but true friendship is rarer still." In the same woman, La Rochefoucauld, fortunate man, found both. He wrote, too, that "the only thing that should astonish us is that we are still capable of being astonished." Yet apart from his work on the *Maximes*, La Rochefoucauld's own life was a pure farce with a relatively happy ending. Life, in its richness, does have its astonishments and seems, it is pleasing to report, to have outwitted him in the end.

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Marked men, numbered days: French "collabo" writers

by Jim Tuck

There has been much discussion about French writers of the Resistance during the Nazi occupation. Probably the most interesting irony that emerges is one of an inverse relationship between active participation in the Resistance and postwar zeal in hounding writers who collaborated. Among the most vengeful were Jean-Paul Sartre, his longtime companion Simone de Beauvoir, and the Communist husband-wife team of Louis Aragon and Elsa Triolet. Yet all four made negligible contributions to the Resistance and, as Tony Judt points out, were often accused of being "heroes after the fact."

By contrast, Albert Camus and François Mauriac had impeccable Resistance credentials. Camus edited the underground paper *Combat*, while Mauriac's activities gave him a moral authority that helped cleanse the stain on Catholicism left by such as the *pétainiste* Cardinal Suhard, barred by de Gaulle from celebrating mass at Notre Dame during the Liberation.

Nonetheless, it was Camus and Mauriac who were relatively soft on collaborationist writers while the *fainéant* quartet of Sartre, de Beauvoir, Aragon, and Triolet took a far harder line. On January 19, 1945, the gifted writer-journalist Robert Brasillach was sentenced to death for his pro-Nazi writings during the occupation. Only thirty-five at the time of his trial, Brasillach had gained renown during the 1930s as a critic, essayist, poet, and novelist of exceptional promise.

When sentence was pronounced, a petition began circulating among leading French intellectuals requesting that Brasillach's life be spared. Both Mauriac and Camus signed it, though for entirely different reasons. "It is terrible to cut off a thinking man's head," wrote Mauriac in *Le Figaro*, "even if it thinks wrongly." Mauriac was in constant touch with Brasillach's mother and made a personal appeal to de Gaulle for clemency. The appeal and petition were denied, and Brasillach went before a firing squad on February 6, 1945.

Though Camus also signed the petition, he made it clear that he was doing so only because of his opposition to the death penalty. Toward Brasillach personally, he felt nothing but contempt. Camus informed Bernard George, who solicited his signature, that Brasillach should be told that once honor is lost it can never be regained.

Sartre, de Beauvoir, Aragon, and Triolet all refused to sign the petition, though de Beauvoir was impressed with Brasillach's dignity at the trial. Wrote de Beauvoir: "We desired the death of the editor of *Je suis partout* [the collaborationist daily headed by Brasillach], not that of this man ready to die well."

The principled behavior of Camus and Mauriac undoubtedly had a mollifying effect on the intransigence of Sartre, Aragon, and company. On November 1, 1945, fourteen months after the Liberation, Sartre published an essay in *Les Temps modernes*

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titled "La Nationalisation de la littérature." In it he deplored the tendency to judge a writer's work by his Resistance credentials, warning that this might lead to a situation in which a critic automatically praises the works of an author whose politics he likes.

Not all *collabo* writers benefited from this kinder, gentler Sartre. Strong personal enmity, dating from prewar years, existed between Sartre and the most gifted radical-Right author of them all, Louis-Ferdinand Céline. In an article for *Le Temps modernes* from December 1945, Sartre accused Céline of having been on the Nazi payroll. An enraged Céline, then in Danish exile, wrote his friend Albert Paraz that he was "going after Sartre" and would "clean the floor with him" in the law courts. In another response he freely indulged his talent for invective and characterized Sartre as a "tapeworm in a turd," a "beetle on a dunghill," and "Cain's anus." Though vituperatively anti-Semitic, Céline always prided himself on his independence from the Germans.

A salient event in Aragon's retreat from a hard-line position was his praise, in 1953, of *Special Friendships*, a novel by the ex-Vichyite writer Roger Peyrefitte. The book was runner-up that year for the Goncourt Prize (won by Aragon's wife) and winner of the almost equally coveted Renaudot Prize. There was in fact something "special" about the Aragon-Peyrefitte *entente*, based on common membership in what Proust described as "the great Freemasonry." Aragon openly embraced a gay lifestyle after his wife's death, while Peyrefitte, in 1940, was forced to resign from the diplomatic service following disclosure of escapades with teenage boys.

Though they eventually mellowed, Aragon, Sartre, and other "heroes after the fact" still had to be dragged kicking and screaming into some semblance of civility toward writers tainted by collaboration. But that doesn't explain the relative tolerance toward collaborating writers shown by such active *résistants* as Mauriac, Camus, and André Malraux. I believe an important factor in shaping their attitude was one of shared danger—a danger they shared not with the less heroic resisters but with their enemies, the collaborators.

This communion of shared danger peaked in early 1943, the pivotal stage of the Occupation. By then, the war had turned against the Germans. With Stalingrad, the long retreat began on the Russian front. Rommel had been smashed at Alamein, and the Americans had linked up with Montgomery's Eighth Army in Tunisia. In the Pacific, U.S. victories at Midway and Guadalcanal had turned the tide as decisively against Japan as defeats in Africa and Russia had against Hitler. Though much hard fighting lay ahead, there was a widespread perception that all chances of Axis victory had evaporated.

The likelihood of eventual Allied triumph did not alter the fact that being an active *résistant* in early 1943 was extremely hazardous, even more than it had been before the North Africa landings of November 1942. The Germans moved into the unoccupied portion of France and the Gestapo was everywhere. Early 1943 also witnessed the birth of the Milice Française, a force of 30,000 paramilitaries organized by Vichy to suppress the Resistance and aid the Germans in rounding up Jews and Communists. Composition of the Milice is of demographic interest. Most *miliciens* were from the south of France, of urban background, and over one-third of the Milice was recruited from just one of France's ninety-five departments. This was Bouches-du-Rhône, which includes Marseilles. The Milice's hard core was made up of thugs from the Marseilles waterfront, adept at street fighting and well-suited to house-to-house "rat hunts" in search of hidden arms and clandestine presses. Between the Gestapo and the Milice, the *résistant* writers of early 1943 were truly in a rock-and-hard-place situation.

An interesting by-product of this camaraderie of shared danger involved instances of strong and enduring friendship between

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men belonging to organizations pledged to destroying one another. One paired Joseph Darnand, head of the Milice, and Raymond-Léopold Bruckberger, a Dominican priest who became a leading figure in the Resistance. Darnand and Bruckberger had served together in the 1939–40 war, when Darnand was decorated for leading a daring raid against a German position. Their friendship never slackened. After the Liberation, Father Bruckberger used all his prestige in an unsuccessful effort to save Darnand from a firing squad. He remained with Darnand during his last hours and walked with him to the execution site.

Principals in another "across-the-trenches" relationship were André Malraux and the *collabo* novelist-journalist Pierre Drieu La Rochelle. They had been friends since the 1920s. As late as 1944, with Drieu deeply compromised by his writings, Malraux offered him a way out by inviting him to enlist in his Free French Alsace-Lorraine brigade. But he insisted that Drieu use a pseudonym; the "Gaullist commandos" in the brigade might object to serving with such a tainted figure. Drieu's rejection of Malraux's offer sealed his doom.

Though the danger shared by resisting and collaborating writers was great, it was qualitatively different. The resisters—particularly those who wrote anti-fascist pamphlets and edited underground papers—knew they were on the winning side but had no certainty that they would live to see the day of victory. The *collabo* writers worked in relative safety and comfort. But, after Stalingrad and North Africa, that comfort was becoming colder every day. The physical danger faced by the *résistants* of early 1943 was a thing of the future for the collaborators—but of a future as inevitable as the dawn.

The intense psychological pressure generated by the prospect of merciless retribution produced a range of responses among the *collabo* writers. Some abruptly switched sides, some stopped writing and took refuge in silence, some continued writing but avoided political themes, while a corps of bitter-enders not only continued, but in some cases intensified, their efforts as propagandists of the crumbling "New Europe."

Of the writers who switched sides, no case attracted more attention than that of Paul Claudel, the eminent Catholic poet-playwright-diplomat. In 1942 Claudel composed an effusive ode to Marshal Pétain. Two years later, during the Liberation, he penned a tribute to General de Gaulle almost identical to its predecessor. Little more than the names had been changed. So unsubtle was Claudel's tergiversation that the mystical author of *L'Annonce fait à Marie* became something of a figure of fun. In 1948 Claudel found himself listed in the *Nouveau dictionnaire des girouettes* ("New Dictionary of Weathervanes"), a comic encyclopedia of famous political turncoats. Transparent though it may have been, Claudel's opportunism paid off. Along with stroking de Gaulle, he engaged in sufficient Resistance activity to exempt him from any sanction during the harsh days of Liberation justice.

Jean Giono furnishes an excellent example of a writer who didn't perish because he didn't publish. In the days after the 1940 defeat, Giono was attracted to Vichy's emphasis on wholesome rural values and rejection of urban materialism and hedonism. A lifelong zeal-of-the-land-bright man, Giono's novels and plays of the interwar years are an unceasing paean to the happy peasant, the good soil, and the ennobling influence of simple country living. Between 1940 and 1942, Giono contributed several articles to *La Nouvelle Revue française*, edited by Drieu La Rochelle. But by the end of 1942 he had stopped writing.

On September 4, 1944, Giono found his name on a list of collaborators drawn up by the National Writers Committee (CNE) and published in its organ, *Les Lettres françaises*. The CNE was an umbrella group for Resistance writers; among its founders were Mauriac and Camus.

Shortly after the condemnation in *Lettres*

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françaises, Giono learned that a file on him had been sent to Paris by a Court of Justice in Aix-en-Provence, near where he lived. About the same time, he received a questionnaire that contained this chilling query: "Did you help the occupying power recruit workers for Germany?"

Giono was ready for his accusers. In a two-page statement, he not only denied the charge but pointed out that he had hidden fugitives from compulsory labor service in Germany on his farm. In addition, he had sheltered a German Communist fleeing the Gestapo and concealed so many Jews on his property that a local collaborationist sheet had called him "the Jewish Consul of Monasque [his home town]." All charges against Giono were dismissed.

The case of Robert Brasillach presents a puzzling paradox. Though he paid with his life, Brasillach was far from being the most hard-line of the *collabo* writers. As if to endorse Talleyrand's principle that "treason is a matter of dates," Brasillach's execution so repelled the French intellectual community that such ultras as Lucien Rebatet and Pierre-Antoine Cousteau escaped the death penalty because they were tried later.

In April 1941, following his release from a German prisoner-of-war camp, Brasillach resumed editorship of *Je suis partout*. The Paris daily had been a stridently right-wing journal before the war; now it was a leading voice of collaboration. The Paris collaborators had always been more pro-German than their counterparts at Vichy. As Robert Paxton points out, the reactionary, tradition-bound Vichy leaders represented the Old Guard and the Paris ideologues, younger and more "modern," the New Order. While at the helm of *Je suis partout*, Brasillach railed at Vichy's conservatism and grudging acceptance of collaboration as a painful duty. What he wanted was enthusiastic collaboration and the creation of a strong, virile, fascist France. This new state, led by a single party, "le parti unique," would be a worthy partner of Germany in a "White International" dedicated to cleansing Europe of democratic decadence and the rot of a squabbling parliamentary system.

Then Brasillach made a shocking discovery: two partisans of restoring parliamentary democracy to postwar France were Adolf Hitler and Josef Goebbels. The last thing the Nazi leaders wanted was a strong, revanchist, fascist power on their western border. In March 1943 Goebbels bluntly declared that National Socialism was not for export. Hitler, according to the Vichy historian Saint-Paulien, told Martin Bormann that he had no wish to impose Nazism on any foreign country. The French could keep their parties and "if certain countries tell me they want to remain democratic, well, so much the better."

This disillusionment set the stage for Brasillach's resignation from *Je suis partout* on August 15, 1943. A majority faction, headed by the director and chief stockholder, Charles Lesca, wanted to attack opponents of the *relève*, the forced deportation of French workers to Germany. Brasillach refused to go along and quit the paper.

His resignation came in an atmosphere of mutual recrimination. In a letter to a friend, Brasillach called Lesca "an Argentine cattle driver" and a "gangster." He advised young friends against joining the French detachment of the Waffen SS and told a would-be volunteer, Jean-Pierre Azéma, that the war was lost. Lesca and his allies retorted that Brasillach was a *degonflé*, a coward, and that collaborators should have less intellect and more character and will. On the eve of the Liberation, Brasillach's detractors at *Je suis partout* crossed the Rhine with the retreating Nazis and offered their services to Vichy's government-in-exile at Sigmaringen castle in Germany. Brasillach stayed on in Paris. On September 1, 1944, hearing that his mother had been arrested by the Resistance, he turned himself in at the nearest police station.

Though fed up with Hitler, that improbable champion of French democracy, Brasillach continued to harbor a deep emotional attachment to Germany. He joined

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the staff of *Révolution nationale*, a publication that welcomed the contributions of "anarcho-fascists," a label that Brasillach now pinned on himself. Brasillach was profoundly sympathetic to the suffering of the outnumbered and outgunned German soldiers. Nor was this an abstract sentiment. His closest German friend, a handsome Wehrmacht officer named Karl Heinz Bremer, was killed on the Russian front in 1942. The death of Bremer ("a young Siegfried") and so many of his comrades moved Brasillach to write an article in *Révolution nationale* in which he declared his love for the Germans and his feeling of "fraternal affection" whenever he saw a German soldier. He also wrote that "Frenchmen of any intelligence"—a group that presumably included himself—"have . . . slept with Germany."

This was a suicide note. While Brasillach might have brushed aside the homophobic hoots of a fellow anarcho-fascist, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, his words were read by the prosecutor when he went on trial. With the SS massacre of six hundred French civilians at Oradour-sur-Glane, anti-German feeling was at a peak in France and Brasillach's tender effusions could not have come at a worse time. More than anything else, it was the *Révolution nationale* article that put Brasillach before a firing squad.

Pierre Drieu La Rochelle was another of the Paris radicals who felt nothing but contempt for the horse-and-buggy brand of fascism (if it could even be called that) practiced at Vichy. A wounded veteran of the First World War, Drieu was profoundly influenced by the experience and exalted by the manly camaraderie of the trenches. Recurring and interlocking themes in Drieu's novels (*Man Covered with Women*, *Dreamy Bourgeoisie*, *Straw Dogs*) are virility versus decadence, and male chauvinism. Robert Soucy, Drieu's biographer, points to Drieu's conviction that "to be monopolized by a woman was to become decadent."

After the 1940 defeat, Drieu declined the offer of a government post at Vichy but accepted the editorship of *La Nouvelle Revue française*. From this vantage point he allied himself with the *Je suis partout* group in calling for a strong fascist France and more vigorous collaboration with Germany.

The war's reversal of fortune only intensified Drieu's zeal. He had resigned from the Parti Populaire Français (PPF), France's leading fascist party, because of a falling out with its leader Jacques Doriot. Now he defiantly rejoined the PPF, despite his dislike for Doriot. "Since there are so many people who hate me," he declared, "I wanted to give them an unmistakable reason for hating and killing me." Drieu backed his words with his pen, grinding out six pro-fascist books between 1943 and 1945.

Yet there are chinks in Drieu's armor as the Ajax white knight of the New Europe. I have mentioned his enduring friendship with Malraux. To this we may add a rather poignant piece of personal drama. Though a convinced fascist and public anti-Semite, Drieu remained on sufficiently good terms with his Jewish ex-wife to save her from the Gestapo in 1942. The lady returned the favor during the Liberation, hiding Drieu out until he gave way to despair and committed suicide on March 16, 1945. Since no prominent *collabo* writer was executed after Brasillach, Drieu might well have escaped a death sentence.

The shooting of Brasillach was such a turning point that we may well speak of "before Brasillach" and "after Brasillach" in considering justice meted out to collaborationist writers. In this context, the cases of Georges Suarez, Paul Chack, and Lucien Rebatet are instructive.

Suarez, a popular historian and biographer of Georges Clemenceau, was arrested on October 2, 1944, and tried three weeks later. The prosecution built its airtight case on 103 articles Suarez had written during the Occupation. When the Allies landed in Normandy, Suarez wrote that "it is the Germans who are defending our soil." He approved of the denunciation and tracking down of Resistance fighters, the killing of Communists and Jews, and even

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came up with a suggestion of his own: that the Germans should take British and American residents of France hostage against Allied bombings.

Fighting with limited weapons, Suarez's lawyer cited Talleyrand's *bon mot* about treason, called attention to Suarez's distinguished literary career, and depicted his client as more "misguided" than disloyal. The jury disagreed, finding Suarez guilty under Article 75 of the French penal code: collusion with the enemy and promoting his interests. He was sentenced to death and executed by rifle fire on November 9.

Paul Chack had the misfortune to attract the special enmity of Charles de Gaulle. De Gaulle was quoted as saying that there were two categories of people who could not be forgiven for collaboration: talented writers and military officers. Chack was both. A former naval officer, he had, like Suarez, been a popular and successful historical writer. De Gaulle was particularly enraged because Chack put his name—preceded by his reserve rank of lieutenant commander—on an order urging members of an anti-Communist action committee to really get into the fight and join the Milice. Chack also wrote front-page editorials in *collabo* journals praising the Germans and denouncing the Resistance. Condemned by a Paris Court of Justice, he was shot in December 1944.

For pro-German extremism, there was nothing in the writings of Suarez and Chack that surpassed those of Lucien Rebatet. In his popular novel, *Les Décombres* ("The Ruins"), Rebatet argued that the Vichy government was too fond of democracy and Jews for his taste and that he preferred to live under the Germans. A *Je suis partout* staffer, Rebatet had been a member of the hard-line pro-Lesca, anti-Brasillach faction. He went to Germany after the Liberation —more than Suarez and Chack did—and there served the *collabo* government-in-exile at Sigmaringen.

Rebatet came to trial in November 1946, a full two years after Suarez and Chack had been shot and twenty-one months after Brasillach's execution. His initial death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment at hard labor. (Predictably, Mauriac and Camus opposed the original sentence.) More commutations followed, and by 1953 he was a free man and regular contributor to *Rivarol*, an organ of unreconstructed Vichyism founded in 1951. Rebatet, candidly attributing his salvation to Brasillach, resumed his career as a far-Right polemicist with no trace of reservation or remorse.

Then there is the special case of the ferociously anti-German Charles Maurras, nonetheless given a life sentence in 1945. Maurras was a leading figure in Action Française, a reactionary clerical and monarchist group whose extensive laundry list of hates included Jews, Freemasons, Protestants, liberals, Marxists of varying stripes, republicans, Anglo-Saxons, and Germans. A stylist and classicist, Maurras wanted to remove such offending "foreign" letters as *k* and *w* from the French language.

Maurras, who spoke lyrically of "goddess France," was painfully aware of Germany's better than three-to-two population edge over his country. At the same time, he dreaded the thought of France being forced into alliance with the hated English. He therefore viewed the advent to power of Marshal Pétain as a "divine surprise." The Vichy government could clean house internally, have nothing further to do with England, and—he hoped—keep victorious Germany at arm's length.

Brasillach had been a pupil of Maurras, but the two fell out over Brasillach's pro-Germanism. Repelled by the entire *Je suis partout* group, Maurras wrote Lesca that "there is no possibility for a French newspaper to keep its honor in Paris at this time. It will be in the hands of the Germans." Where Brasillach enthusiastically supported formation of the Legion of French Volunteers Against Bolshevism, the prospect of young Frenchmen in German uniforms was anathema to Maurras. Better, he argued, to fight communism in France than on the plains of Russia. Action Française published

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a newspaper of the same name. In a February 15, 1942, editorial, Maurras wrote that "we no longer have any relations with M. Brasillach."

What got Maurras in trouble was his peculiar reasoning that it was all right to denounce Jews, Communists, and Resistance members as long as you did it to the Vichy authorities and not to the Germans. In 1944 a French Jew suggested that some Eastern European refugees might be settled in French villages. The proposal was apparently made in private and meant only for the ears of selected people at the top. Maurras, enraged at the thought of "goddess France" being defiled by "filth from the ghettos of Central Europe," publicly denounced the Jew by name.

At Maurras's trial, Paul Claudel, a lifelong enemy, submitted an affidavit that Maurras had turned him in to the Vichy police—who promptly handed the job of tracking Claudel over to the Gestapo.

Rejecting Maurras's casuistry about Vichy and Germany, a court in Lyon sentenced him to solitary confinement for life. Said Maurras when he heard the verdict: "It is the revenge of Dreyfus!" In 1952, the eighty-three-year-old man was given a medical pardon. He died the same year in a private hospital.

The absence of rigorous criteria for judging *collabo* writers undoubtedly added confusion to an already murky situation. Along with a dove-hawk split between Mauriac-Camus and Aragon-Sartre, there was something of a dove-dove controversy between the former. Camus believed in punishment for the guilty. In *Le Figaro* of October 19, 1944, Mauriac had called for "national reconciliation." The next day Camus wrote in *Combat* that "we don't agree with M. François Mauriac." While denying that he advocated "frontier justice," Camus declared: "Our conviction is that there are times when one must be able to overcome one's feelings and at the same time sacrifice peace of mind." Yet Camus's detestation of capital punishment would make him plead for the lives of men he despised. In 1948 Camus admitted that he had been wrong and Mauriac right.

Pierre Bourdan, a Free French propagandist, expressed the opinion in a letter to de Gaulle that *collabo* writers were being unfairly singled out for harsh treatment during the Liberation. By contrast, "lawyers who denounced Frenchmen to the enemy are now back arguing cases in court, generals and admirals responsible for the deaths of hundreds of French and Allied soldiers [and] businessmen who reinforced the German war machine . . . serve minor sentences in comfort."

Again, this seems to ignore Talleyrand's dictum about the chronology of treason. When did these offending lawyers, military leaders, and businessmen begin to be treated with relative leniency? Certainly not during the period from late 1944 to early 1945.

And writers? In 1951, Louis-Ferdinand Céline was given a one-year suspended sentence because he qualified under a special statute applying to disabled World War I veterans. In 1945, a Paris nightclub dancer who had had an affair with Jacques Doriot drew a year at hard labor. Without wishing to increase the travail of the tormented Céline, few would not want to subtract from that of a lady whose only offense was bedding a fascist.

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Poems *by Dana Gioia, Floyd Skloot, David Gelernter & James Richardson*

Summer storm

We stood on the rented patio
While the party went on inside.
You knew the groom from college.
I was a friend of the bride.

We hugged the brownstone wall behind us
To keep our dress clothes dry
And watched the sudden summer storm
Floodlit against the sky.

The rain was like a waterfall
Of brilliant beaded light,
Cool and silent as the stars
The storm hid from the night.

To my surprise you took my arm—
A gesture you didn't explain—
And we spoke in whispers, as if we two
Might imitate the rain.

Then suddenly the storm receded
As swiftly as it came.
The doors behind us opened up.
The hostess called your name.

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I watched you merge into the group,
Aloof and yet polite.
We didn't speak another word
Except to say good night.

Why does that evening's memory
Return with this night's storm—
A party twenty years ago,
Its disappointments warm?

There are so many *might have beens*,
What ifs that won't stay buried,
Other cities, other jobs,
Strangers we might have married.

And memory insists on pining
For places it never went,
As if life would be happier
Just by being different.

—*Dana Gioia*

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Kokoschka in love, 1914

It does not matter how a mountain found
its way into these waves. Perhaps the wind,
perhaps the war. He turns in predawn light
to find his Alma's pale arms held as though bound

to the bedposts. Her eyes are giving back
their horde of pure darkness as though the night
were hers for good. He knows those eyes will rend
his flesh unless he paints them closed, the black

buried in swirling seas along with blood
and the morning's first full blue as the ship
their bare bed has become shatters. The lip
of the whirlpool will be gushing with gold

flecks of foam and silver will mark the clouds.
It is the tempest and she is the bride
of the wind fitted now against his side.
He will do it right if he can just hold

himself together long enough, if he
can disentangle himself before she
feels his absence or a chill in the air,
if he can leave her there without a sound.

—Floyd Skloot

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You again?

I cannot say what made them reappear.
But I'll climb in and clatter down the street
pedalling my low-slung fire truck: will steer
down sleek white sidewalks, glittering cars neat
brushed and purring lawns beside me, here,
right, bump, to the flagpole where the Mommies meet.
Flushed full of wind the flag seems not to stir:
We never guessed how beautiful you were.

When thinking traps an era in a dewdrop—
liquid gray-blue TV light and shy
sweet gropings in soft silence you *must* stop
and sigh for birthday party girls gone by
in crumpled polka dots and ribbons; rev her up,
no *brake*—too late—you see that sky?
That great pink-orange dome of city light
behind us in the backwards-rushing night?

Well yes okay, that fire truck's no urn.
But I gaze nonetheless at classical time.
Years sailed grandly, once; now black tires burn,
squeal, smoke, and shuddering you climb—
can't feel it?—upwards, piercing clouds, turn
back, the past collapsing to a point, I'm
trying to relax just simply fly.
That child upon the ancient vase. Am *I*—?

—David Gelernter

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Holes

Since I've learned little by little
how these things go,
and know that a pond is stone's

blue clarity
where it has understood the sky,
since maybe this explains my eyes

or how my body's flute-long hollow
formed to your embouchure,
since all my arguments are full of holes,

it's silly to scheme against my flaws
as if they were not mine,
as if they were more than one

window scissored open
in a snowflake, which a child's
unfolding multiplies:

slips in my calculation,
knee suddenly air,
terrible weakness for the smell of your hair.

—James Richardson

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Theater

Freaks far-flung & local

by Mark Steyn

The strategy, if that's what it was, worked. Nine months ago, Broadway's line-up for the season looked like a "Back to the Sixties" nostalgia fest: Julie Andrews, Carol Burnett, Carol Channing in *Hello, Dolly!* By the end of the season, at least for press agents, it *was* the Sixties: a rock musical was on the cover of *Newsweek*, Miss Andrews was on the front pages of the tabloids day after day ("MARY POPPINS HOPPIN' MAD!" —*New York Post*), and even David Merrick emerged from his long, silent twilight existence to run one of those whimsical *New York Times* ads he was once famous for. The Tony committee had ruled that Rodgers and Hammerstein's *State Fair*, which uses some old movie numbers and four discarded trunk songs cut from other shows, was eligible for Best Original Score, but only for the quartet of trunk songs. It was a fatuous decision, and Merrick gleefully mocked it in an ad showing scenes from all four songs next to an exuberant shot of the show's nominated actor: "Scott Wise tips his hat to fellow Tony nominees Rodgers & Hammerstein."

The Tony Awards need not detain us long. Clearly, this is not an "original score," in that not one of these songs is a new song specifically written for a musical play of *State Fair*. But, if you're going to nominate the score, you've got to nominate the score, not just four songs. And, if four songs is all it takes to qualify as a Best Score nominee, a good 60 percent of all the straight plays in town are eligible. For years, the Tonys have been a joke because there've been too many categories and too few plays to fill them: as in the children's pumpkin festival in my little town, everybody knows they'll get something. But, for once, with what passes for a crowded season in New York, there was some real competition. With the noisier controversies, it's pointless to speculate on motives. I don't suppose Brendan Gill liked *Bring In 'da Noise, Bring In 'da Funk* all *that* much, nor Marge Champion *Rent*, and certainly a tired dinner-theater revue like *Swingin' on a Star*, whose woeful lack of imagination utterly demeaned its source material (the lyrics of Johnny Burke), has no place on any awards list. But I would like to think that, in freezing out the "traditional" musicals like *Big* and *Victor/Victoria*, the nominating committee wasn't merely bowing to the prevailing orthodoxies about the need to move away from "old-fashioned" shows to shows which attract "young" audiences. After all, with the "yoof" movement in control of movies and pop music and most everything else, it seems only fair that the theater should be an outlet for the demographically challenged: shunned by the Zeitgeist, starved of positive role models, the unhip are surely America's most ruthlessly oppressed minority.

I hope, rather, that Gill, Miss Champion, and company were striking a blow in a much nobler cause, for a theatrical culture in which genuine artistic impulse is still dis-

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cernible. *Bring In 'da Noise*'s trump card is a simple one: nine months ago, it didn't exist—not a word of it, not a single page of script. It was lucky enough to make it to the stage before its creators had forgotten why on earth they'd ever wanted to embark on the project. That shows. In contrast, *Big* and *Victor/Victoria* have been in "development" for years (in *Victor*'s case, for so long that its composer, Henry Mancini, had died a year before opening night). That shows, too. *Big* is too polished; it's over-rehearsed, over-rewritten, over-fixed. There is an important truth in the old actor's joke: the key is sincerity; if you can fake that, you can fake anything. Too many of today's plays and musicals have forgotten that. *Bring In 'da Noise*'s content—centuries of black oppression argued out in tap-dancing—is nonsense, but it's still possible to respond to its straightforward sincerity, in the same way that so many left-wing, pro-choice, pro-gay, pro-José columnists can't help admiring Pat Buchanan. By contrast, *Big* is the Lamar Alexander of drama: its desperation to please is grating. Its very inoffensiveness becomes offensive.

Big (at the Shubert) is about a twelve-year-old boy who, overnight, becomes a grown man. The charm of the original film lies in Tom Hanks's sweet performance, the one that defined him and paved the way for *Forrest Gump* et al. Hanks had a lack of guile and a sense of wonder. His musical successor never does, because David Shire and Richard Maltby, Jr., have given him the wrong material to sing. From his opening number, every song is a psychological self-examination:

> I wish I knew what was happening to me . . .
>
> Why does disaster follow me . . . ?
>
> What do I make of this?
> Where is she coming from?
>
> What do I do when I'm in her room?
> What kind of lightning strikes you?

As the show proceeds, it becomes almost a textbook lesson in how not to adapt your source material. The more li'l Josh questions himself in every number, the more the musical *Big* eats away at what made the original character so appealing. Despite the very obviously hard work of Mike Ockrent (director) and Susan Stroman (choreographer), *Big* can never be big because Shire and Maltby have never found a satisfactory answer to the first question you should ask yourself before every musical adaptation: what's there to sing about?

The creators of *Big* are all big—big Broadway muscle—but it's a pygmy project, and, like Gulliver's Lilliputians, it has tied up the big boys in knots. At the highest level in American theater, the most talented, expert practitioners find themselves increasingly preoccupied with projects that aren't worth their attention: they must stoop to conquer. Oddly enough, this is even more pronounced in straight plays than in musicals. Anyone can beat up on *Victor/Victoria*, but it would have taken more courage for the Tony nominators to exclude its straight play equivalent, *Master Class* (at the Golden). Terrence McNally knows more about Maria Callas than most people, but he has chosen instead to offer only movie-of-the-week psychobabble, a mélange of gossip-sheet images: the tragic victim, the egotistical diva, the woman who loves too much. McNally falls back on a clumsy device: every so often, during Callas's classes at the Juilliard School, the lights dim and we realize that she is lost in memory. Every time it happens, she lapses into a long soliloquy that sounds like someone reading a badly translated generic opera libretto: "I have everyone where I want them. They're not smiling now. With each phrase, I come closer to the footlights," she says, talking us through one performance at La Scala. "My revenge, my triumph are complete. The applause is washing over me. I only have one note left to sing. Ah, yes, it's over! I've won again!" Despite Zoe Caldwell's best efforts, what we wind up with is a drag-queen redaction of Callas. McNally must know

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this, as he must know, too, that he has failed to create a stage character for her, or a stage language (plays about gay Manhattanites aside, his ear for dialogue has never been reliable); he is content merely to feast off her legend. We learn no more about Callas than we knew before we arrived. America's celebrity obsession infects every area of life these days, but *Master Class* is even cheesier than *The National Enquirer*: at least, on its better days, the *Enquirer* knows how to turn up a telling detail or two.

Most biodramas are lazy and parasitic, a way for unadventurous producers to insure that, if you can't have a star in the cast, at least you'll have one in the dramatis personae. Down at the Public Theatre, there's a more inspired example of the genre in *Venus* by Suzan-Lori Parks. Venus is the Hottentot Venus, a black woman with such an enormous bottom that she became a wildly popular touring exhibit in early nineteenth-century England. Her name survives in common parlance in Britain, though I doubt whether many have more than a hazy grasp of its origins; nonetheless, on the London tube not so long ago, I overheard a secretary bemoaning to a friend the dimpled condition of "my Hottentot botty." The play's preoccupations establish themselves in the opening moments, as the Hottentot appears before a gaggle of leering Beau Brummels: top hats, white guys . . . and tail. You'll forgive me, but Miss Parks's style, a relentless, rhythmic, repetitive word play, is catching. For, as she states early on, arguing the significance of the Hottentot's voluminous buttocks: "The butt is the past. The posterior, posterity." You could go on like this forever—the tail is our tale, the asshole ah soul, etc.—and at times Miss Parks threatens to: "She's a woman with a past. A big past. History." Onto the Hottentot's celebrated caboose, Miss Parks has coupled a veritable Superchief of metaphor.

"Come on inside," roars the Mother Showman in her ballyhoo, "and allow her to reveal to you the great and horrid wonder of her great heathen buttocks!" The Venus had a name, though few then and fewer now ever knew it: Miss Sartje Baartman. In restoring her humanity, in making her the center of attention for more than the size of her butt, Miss Parks reduces the grander figures in the Hottentot's life to the same freak-show shorthand: characters are labeled "the Mother Showman," "the Noted Abolitionist," the "Negro Resurrectionist" and, for the Frenchman who takes her in for the purpose of scientific study, "the Baron Docteur." During the play's intermission, the Docteur actually delivers a disquisition "on the various Physical Aspects of the Venus Hottentot." But he also falls in love with her, circling her body, fondling her rump as she eats chocolates, all the while resisting the calls of fellow academics to "macerate" her—that's to say, kill her and debone her, the better to measure and quantify her fatty tissue. It's not hard to see the Docteur as yet another in a long line of Pygmalions, but, whereas Shaw's play and Lerner and Loewe's musical gradually shift the point of view from Higgins to Eliza, in *Venus* the view *is* the point. The Hottentot can be seen as a prototype of our empty-vessel electronic celebrities: from the moment we see her, she is defined by those watching her, examining her, drawing her.

For much of the time, though, Richard Foreman's staging and design is oddly bloodless for such a full-bodied (in every sense) drama. There are all this director's usual trademarks—the lattice of strings crisscrossing the stage like a vast crossroads of telegraph wires, a chorus in fright wigs with sullen rock-star pouts and dark glasses, masks and puppets, and tape loops of calliope music—the high-style detritus you could find clogging up any old off-Broadway play of the last thirty years. For all the sterile discussions of form and content the theater indulges in, we forget that what audiences still respond to most is fascinating characters brought alive in their time. *Venus* can be seen, like *Bring In 'da Noise* and August Wilson's *Seven Guitars*, as part of the ongoing task black dramatists have set themselves of "reclaiming" their history:

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there is much in Miss Parks's play about the violation that occurs when one people fix history for other peoples, a familiar refrain in her work since *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990). But I think, if you were British or French, you'd be struck instead by how the Hottentot's story has simply undergone another form of cultural appropriation: a black woman living in nineteenth-century Europe with Anglo-French social aspirations has been posthumously African-Americanized. So much "reclaiming" of "African-American history" boils down to a failure to see the past except as a warm-up act for the present, a refusal to imagine that other people in other times had other things on their minds: when *Venus* is at its weakest, it's because Miss Parks has kitted her luxuriously upholstered butt in the heavy underwear of 1990s victim-speak. Going from *Seven Guitars* to *Bring In 'da Noise* to *Venus*, from Joe Louis to Bill "Bojangles" Robinson to the Hottentot, you eventually begin to wonder why there are no plays about equivalent white figures—about Gentleman Jim Corbett or Nora Bayes or Tom Thumb. August Wilson would argue, I suspect, that blacks have a deeper folk memory precisely because they were excluded from official history. But, if that ever was true, it is no longer. In our cities, most black babies are born cut off from their past in ways Alex Haley's *Roots* could never have imagined: never mind being able to trace their great-great-great-great-grandfathers, these kids can't even trace their fathers. And black culture disdains its famous forebears in favor of the ultimate in instant gratification: in its pneumatic insistence, rap is the perfect soundtrack for a present-tense existence, for a world without memory. It is, surely, time for a play in which black history is reclaimed from black self-destruction.

Still, you don't have to subscribe to Miss Parks's ideas on race, colonialism, white male sexual guilt, and all the other predictable baggage, you don't have to admire this play as the best play that could be written on the Hottentot Venus, to recognize that she's a terrific subject for a play. Miss Parks got to her first, and, at a time when the theatrical horizon barely stretches to the outer boroughs, she deserves credit for that. Significantly, the play's great triumph, amid all the tiresome show-biz ransacking going on on Broadway and off, is that it has found the ultimate show-biz metaphor in a forgotten figure. Far more effectively than *Master Class*, *Venus* is about show business, or, as especially arch theatricals like to say, "this business we call show." The Hottentot's business *is* show—showing her bottom. As the Mother Showman never quite says, her future is all behind her, and her fame is also her burthen. The ambiguities are endless, but their exploration on stage becomes a testament to the power of theater. For in the end, the best ideas have to be grounded in the actors representing them. Miss Parks's play is literally written on the body, and especially focused on that big, black butt. Aided, presumably, by some well-padded mocha-colored body stockings, Adina Porter brings the Hottentot to life with a wonderful blend of bewilderment and sexual ease and an ability to reflect the carelessness of her audiences, their inability to understand the shame of their obsession. "She died of overexposure," says the author in the play's final pun.

Straight plays have to be about great acting. We've tried all the other flimflam—the shtick, the business, the masks and masques, and stylized movement and distorted tape-loop accompaniments—and none of it's any substitute: you wind up like a musical with no tunes. I've been reminded of the power of acting on two occasions this season. The first was Uta Hagen as the eponymous psychoanalyst of *Mrs. Klein*. In Paris, a couple of years back, they did the play as a neo-expressionist, white-box production in slow motion: we all got home at about two in the morning, and it wasn't a tenth as good. If you're doing a play called *Mrs. Klein*, the first thing you need is a Mrs. Klein, and Uta Hagen conjures that woman more thoroughly than any other production. The

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second occasion was Steppenwolf's revival of Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* (at the Brooks Atkinson), his Broadway debut and one of this year's Best Play nominees, even though he wrote it in 1978. If Rodgers and Hammerstein can get a Best Score nomination for four songs they wrote fifty years ago, there's no reason why Shepard can't get a Best Play nomination for something he wrote a mere twenty years ago. He has, the Tony committee was at pains to point out, substantially rewritten the work. But, more importantly, the ground around the author has shifted since *Buried Child* was first seen. In the Seventies, as off-Broadway's coolest dude, he was seen by some as a heavy-handed trasher of the American Dream. In the Nineties, as off-Broadway has dwindled away to overwrought gay coming-of-age tracts and black empowerment sing-alongs and campy transvestite frolics, Shepard's dramatic landscape has become one of the last territories in which the American Dream can be explored in any way at all. Today, his dysfunctional families in the hinterlands—in the Southwest, Montana, Illinois, all off-off-off-off-off-off-Broadway as far as most dramatists are concerned—now seem like a perverse celebration of America.

In *Buried Child*, we are in Illinois farm country, in the late Seventies, in the pouring rain, in a decrepit, gloomy parlor, closed off from outside light except through a crumbling screen porch and a door of broken glass. The least moth-eaten thing in the room is an old deer head: the sofa is shabby and stuffed with newspaper, the stair carpet is threadbare and seems to stretch to the attic. From the top of the impossibly long staircase, Halie (Lois Smith) screams down to her husband Dodge (James Gammon), who emerges from underneath a soiled, worn blanket on the sofa. They begin a blackly funny argument that, by this stage in their long marriage, has become pure ritual. Gammon's bewhiskered old-timer commands the stage, which is an impressive achievement given that he spends almost all the play either under his filthy blanket or a

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pile of corn husks or in some other humiliating position. His dry rasp, like the play's dark secrets, seems to have risen up from fathomless depths. "It's like a Norman Rockwell cover or somethin'," says Shelley, as she arrives from Los Angeles. It isn't, of course: this is a Gothic horror house where the inhabitants haunt themselves.

Shelley turns up with Vince, her boy friend and supposedly the grandson of Dodge. If *Big* is about a twelve-year-old boy who wants to be grown-up, in *Buried Child* the journey is attempted from the other direction: like his father before him, Vince is a grown-up child who returns home after a long absence, only to find that none of his family recognizes him. The illusory security of identity is a common theme in Shepard. In *Fool for Love*, May tells Eddie, "You're gonna erase me": their passion is so highly combustible, it will wipe her out. *Buried Child* presents the opposite problem: an identity under threat of erasure through indifference. Even when Vince reprises his old party trick, playing "When the Saints Go Marching In" on his teeth, his pa and gran'pa still don't recognize him. Dodge and Halie and their two sons, the lumbering hulk Tilden and the one-legged sadist Bradley, are intertwined far more deeply (incestuously even) than most families, yet all of them seem to live alone.

In précis, the characters sound like grotesques. In Gary Sinise's production, and especially the playing of Terry Kinney (Tilden) and Leo Burmester (Bradley), they manage to make their grotesqueness almost prosaic and routine—an inevitable consequence of farming life in a harsh climate: to counter the old line about lives of quiet desperation, these are lives of savage resignation. Shepard has been called willfully obscure, but to build a successful career in the modern American theater without stooping to the tidy plot mechanics and pat pop psychology of McNally or Neil Simon is no mean achievement. All kinds of writers like to tough it out in a B-movie rock'n'roll vernacular, but Shepard is one of the few to transform it into a dark colloquial poetry: words like "raw" and "blistering" are often applied, but, personally, I find his dialogue has the same unobtrusive rhythmic precision as light verse—Noël Coward dressed up as Willie Nelson. It's the perfect springboard for Steppenwolf's intense, bravura acting style. Most everything you find on Broadway these days is either dead (Rodgers and Hammerstein, *Rent*'s Jonathan Larson) or has nowhere else to go (Julie Andrews, Carol Channing, worn-out rock extravaganzas like *Tommy*). To some, Shepard's belated arrival on the Great White Way reduces him to just another leathery old elephant heading for the graveyard. But, in a season where the choice boils down to airbrushed dross or incoherent posturing, his appearance is modestly encouraging. *Buried Child* is both elusive and visceral. It offers a trick you rarely see on Broadway: in contrast to *Big* or *Rent* or *Master Class*, it finds entertainment in ambiguity.

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Art

Jan Steen in Washington

by Karen Wilkin

Over the past five years, if you were willing to do a little traveling, you could have learned an enormous amount about seventeenth-century Northern European painting, right here in the U.S.A. I'm thinking of the astonishing sequence of such exhibitions as the Anthony van Dyck survey in Washington, "The Age of Rubens" in Boston, "Rembrandt, Not Rembrandt" at the Met, and, most recently, the National Gallery's Johannes Vermeer retrospective, immediately followed by the present study of his compatriot and contemporary, "Jan Steen: Painter and Storyteller."[1] The list reads like the description of an old-style seminar—"Problems in Dutch and Flemish Baroque: Through a close analysis of the work of key artists from a crucial period in the Low Countries' history, the artists' formations and influences, individual and shared qualities, both unique and typical of the period, will be revealed and identified." I'm not being entirely facetious. Good as each of these exhibitions was in itself, the cumulative effect of the series was probably far more enlightening than any one show. Seeing the Steen exhibit hard on the heels of the Vermeer retrospective, for example, intensified its impact and clarified its message. Looking at a large number of Steens while the Vermeer show was fresh in the mind made each of the painters' particular gifts and achievements transparently evident.

The two painters' careers overlapped. Steen (1626–1679) was six years older than Vermeer but outlived him by four years. Both were Catholics in a proudly Protestant country. A larger and more varied body of Steen's work has come down to us than of Vermeer's—Steen seems to have been an altogether more productive and wide-ranging painter—but the principal subject matter of the two artists was, at least superficially, almost identical: scenes of everyday life, ordinary domesticity, familiar occurrences that allude to larger moral issues. There the resemblance ends. Steen, even at his best, lacked Vermeer's unerring eye for tonality, his unfailing ability to orchestrate nuances of light and color, and his uncanny gift for revealing an ideal, Platonic harmony beneath the randomness of the quotidian. Although Steen's pictures are less exquisitely constructed, less rationally ordered than Vermeer's, they lack neither charm nor distinction. And it's clear that Steen aspired to something quite different from his Delft

1 "Jan Steen: Painter and Storyteller" opened at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, on April 28, 1996, and remains on view through August 18. The show will reopen at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, on September 21, 1996, and remain on view through January 12, 1997. A catalogue of the exhibition, with essays by Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., Wouter Th. Kloek, and H. Perry Chapman, among others, has been published by the National Gallery of Art and the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (272 pages, $50; $29.95 paper).

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colleague. His vision of life in seventeenth-century Holland is, in a sense, the flip side of Vermeer's; he is Dionysus to Vermeer's Apollo.

In Steen's paintings, the rather bare, tile-floored rooms, lit by many-paned windows, that serve as settings for Vermeer's tranquil dramas, are invaded by a gang of unruly children, bibulous adults, and flirtatious youths, a bustling, jostling crew that strews debris, shoves furniture about, and generally shatters the tidiness of Dutch domestic life; an intelligent-looking brown and white spaniel, a regular member of Steen's troupe, invariably behaves with far greater decorum than most of his human companions. The implacable order and stillness of Vermeer's interiors, the silence broken only by the tinkling of the virginal or the strumming of a lute, is disrupted by the cheerful chaos of Steen's raucous families, his cardplayers, his smokers, and his red-faced drinkers. (I'm told that a still-current Dutch expression, "a Jan Steen household," refers to an untidy home full of noisy children.)

Where Vermeer cultivates restraint and economy, Steen revels in excess. In contrast to Vermeer's hermetically sealed, circumscribed, geometrically pure interiors, Steen's world is less tightly constructed, more open; in his domestic scenes, you can see into the next room, down the hall, and sometimes, even, out the window. Vermeer's introspective figures and couples exchanging charged glances are replaced, in Steen's recountings, by crowded groups comprising all ages, each participant apparently engaged in a different activity. I've said elsewhere that Vermeer's best paintings are implied—as opposed to specific—narratives; the moment depicted seems neutral, almost insignificant, yet it reverberates with the past and suggests an infinite number of future possibilities. Steen, on the other hand, spins elaborate yarns, sets them firmly in the present tense, and embellishes them with all sorts of elaborate anecdotal observations. He is as apt to paint the interiors of kitchens or the vine-shaded courtyards of country taverns as he is the reception rooms of respectable bourgeois urban houses, clearly delighting in the excuse such subject matter provides for a wealth of detail. Steen informs you how people supported the grapevines that they cultivated around their doorways, what kind of baskets they used to take chickens to market, what sort of kitchen vessels and flower pots they employed, what kind of containers they drank beer from. You can learn what children played with, how many buttons there were on a working class waistcoat, how hams and sausages were stored in well-supplied kitchens, and what an available but high-priced woman's bedroom looked like.

Steen's appetite for the variousness and irregularity of actuality is obvious in the rather unlovely types who populate his canvases. He never sentimentalizes children—many of them, in fact, are what Tennessee Williams called "no-neck monsters"—and he clearly relishes the lumpy noses, jowls, or receding chins of his revellers. His rare attempts at idealization are oddly unconvincing; the beautiful young woman, her elegant, small head perched on a swan neck, who occasionally wanders into Steen's scenes of high and low life, never seems as convincing as her earthier counterparts. The painter must have realized where his strengths lay. In his quest for the specific, he often cast his family members, himself included, as unglamorized but effective principal actors in even his most unbridled tableaux.

For all their hearty realism, however, Steen's scenes of domesticity are not simply anecdotal records. Some are elaborate visual puns and jokes, while others illustrate moralizing proverbs that caution against excess and lax living. The Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum's *In Luxury Beware* (1663) and the Mauritshuis's famous *As the Old Sing, So Pipe the Young* (c. 1663–65) seem, at first glance, to be straightforward depictions of rowdy family parties—the former crowded into a coolly lit room full of scat-

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tered oddments, the latter packed around a small table. Both take place in similar settings—a room with bare plaster walls, a wide-planked floor, and a tall window at the left. What attracts you first to *In Luxury Beware* is the painting's pale, chalky palette and its Brueghel-like, even-handed distribution of relatively small incidents across the entire canvas. (Brueghel's influence is a pervasive one in Steen's paintings; entire compositions are based overtly on Brueghel's motifs while others include figures and poses that approach out-and-out quotation.) Yet you soon discover the discordancies in the composition of *In Luxury Beware*: a hanging basket of objects that resists common-sense interpretation, a duck perched on a dignified burgher's shoulder, children running riot, a dog—not the spaniel—eating its fill of the family's meal, a dissolute young man and a complaisant young woman in a compromising pose front and center, and, oddest of all, a perfectly charming pig who enters the fray and seems to ignore the pretzels strewn on the floor in favor of a full-blown rose.

It turns out that all these engagingly depicted episodes are designed to expose the dangers of a lack of discipline and self-denial. As with so many of Steen's paintings, however, his pleasure in rendering the very particulars that are to be avoided is so palpable that the admonitory subtext seems (at least to twentieth-century eyes) almost beside the point. Similarly, the message of *As the Old Sing, So Pipe the Young*—roughly, "parents who set a bad example will have rotten kids"—seems less compelling, to modern viewers, than Steen's fascination with the questionable goings-on. And he takes voluptuous enjoyment in painting the crackling rose-lavender silk skirt and green velvet, fur-trimmed jacket of the flushed blonde woman (a portrait of his wife, the daughter of the painter Jan van Goyen) who extends her wine glass for a refill. That oversized goblet, with its glowing red contents, serves as the picture's anchor. Everything radiates from it and keys off of it: the red parrot, a red-filled beaker on the window sill, a cap, a sleeve, the upholstery of a chair.

As in almost all of Steen's pictures, the parts of *As the Old Sing* are more satisfying than the entirety. Your attention is rewarded if you concentrate on the play of the volumes of the beaker and bottle on the windowsill and the robust pewter-topped jug on the floor against the planes of the setting. It's exhilarating to discover the tense, harmonious axis formed by the widely spaced, near-mirror images of the wine-pourer and the drinking woman, their outstretched arms tenuously linked by the thin ribbon of cascading wine. But the composition as a whole lacks clarity and unity; overall rhythms are disjunctive, half-hidden figures seem crammed into gaps rather than situated solidly in background space, while elements in the foreground—with the exception, once again, of that dignified brown and white spaniel—often refuse to separate themselves from things meant to be seen as farther away. The whole seems casual, random, a little soft. As a result, you tend to read Steen's narrative paintings incrementally, as though you were reading a written text, just as you do the complex narrative paintings of the paradigmatic Baroque *peintre-philosophe*, Nicolas Poussin; but in Poussin's pictures, a rock-solid architectural structure subsumes even the most elaborate of his moral and didactic conceits, turning complicated conceptual themes into magnificently unified, powerful visual experiences.

The difference between the two approaches is, of course, the difference between quintessentially Northern vernacular anecdote and Italian-influenced French intellectualism, but to bemoan this difference or to look for Poussin's brand of operatic wholeness in Steen is to miss the point. What his pictures offer is an accumulation of extremely convincing, surprisingly immediate observations, sometimes amusing, sometimes instructive, sometimes ravishing. His intimate exchanges between individuals, telling particulars, and, from time to

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time, gorgeous passages of painting are still capable of speaking to us directly.

For Steen's contemporaries, of course, his jokes, salacious asides, and moral messages were immediately legible, in ways that they are not to the great majority of modern viewers. A perceptive catalogue essay by the Dutch scholar Eddy de Jongh addresses the interesting question of how present-day audiences can approach these works. It is possible to unravel allusions, "decode" subtexts, and "unpack" hidden meanings, as historians such as de Jongh have done, but even then, can we ever hope to read these paintings, for all the immediacy we still attribute to them, as they were read in their own day? Not entirely, says de Jongh, pointing out, for example, that what was funny or urgent in 1663 probably isn't today. (What was hilarious in 1863—or even 1963—may not be, either.) Being aware of Steen's intentions is enriching, even though they are certainly not what determine the success or failure of his paitings. But, de Jongh cautions, it would be a great pity to regard Steen's energetic, accomplished pictures only as sociological documents of mores in seventeenth-century Holland.

Fortunately, the curators of the exhibition have provided ample evidence of the breadth of Steen's reach in their selection. In addition to the familiar scenes of uproarious domestic and tavern life, and the occasional excursion into downright bawdiness, there are a few portraits and self-portraits, genre paintings of great sobriety and tenderness, and paintings of religious subjects. (These last sometimes acknowledge a debt to Rembrandt in their simplified compositions and groupings of large-scale figures, in contrast to Steen's more usual multiplicity of rather small-scale figures.) There are delightful surprises throughout the show: the Northern afternoon light of the small, enchanting *Skittle Players Outside an Inn* (c. 1663, National Gallery, London); the virtuoso rendering of a *changeant* pink and blue silk skirt in the Norton Simon's *Wine is a Mocker* (c. 1668–70); the delicious contrasts of a Turkish carpet, a blue velvet cushion, a blue and white porcelain bowl of oranges, and a shimmering rose pink gown in *The Wedding of Tobias and Sarah* (c. 1671–73, The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco). There's the elegant angle of the shoulders of a young woman seen from the back in an atypically restrained scene of a family at prayer, and the truly bizarre foot of Amnon, kicking his sister Tamar off the premises, in a sumptuously colored little picture from Cologne. And the glimpse into an artist's studio of the period in the Getty Museum's fine *Drawing Lesson* (c. 1663–65) in its splendid period frame.

The catalogue, with contributions by a distinguished roster of Dutch contributors, as well as essays and entries by the show's international team of curators, examines, as is currently obligatory, how Steen was perceived in the past, and what aspects of his work were valued most highly, when. This is complemented by a scrupulously researched chronology of the artist's career, which acts as an illuminating gloss on an eighteenth-century life of Steen. The essays offer fascinating, often surprising information about being an artist in seventeenth-century Holland. Little is known, for example, about Steen's early years and education as an artist, but he came to enjoy a considerable reputation as a painter. The grandson of a successful grain merchant, the son of a brewer, and the son-in-law of a celebrated artist, Steen seems to have tried to flourish in both the world of art and of business, although an attempt to run a brewery apparently failed (afterwards, he is said to have devoted himself entirely to painting). Why and how he became a painter at all seems to be a mystery. His biographers stress that he came from a cultured, middle-class household and that drawing instruction would have been part of an all-around humanistic education, but they ultimately fall back on the assumption that someone must have pointed out to Steen's father that the boy had talent.

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In his catalogue essay, Lykle de Vries notes, provocatively, that at the time Steen would have been ready to take his place in the family business, the Dutch brewing industry was experiencing serious problems, so that improbable as it seems, painting could have offered a stable, if expedient career. "Brewing and painting were to play a permanent role in Steen's life story," de Vries announces, pointing out that the evident inconsistency, technical problems, and overt derivativeness of the painter's early work suggest a less than thorough training. Whatever questions they leave unanswered, the catalogue texts bring vividly to life the challenges faced by modern-day art historians in their attempts to come to grips with the culture that produced the works they study, not the least being the frequent unreliability of their predecessors; the piece by Steen's eighteenth-century biographer Arnold Houbraken, however, is entertaining. Other essays deal with Steen's narratives, his sources, including his probable interest in theatrical conventions of the day, and the relation of his work to Dutch painting in general. (There's also a highly technical, rather plodding section on Steen's techniques and methods.) In Washington, a small, choice exhibition of Northern genre prints from the National Gallery's own collections, installed adjacent to the main event, documents the evolution of Steen's lusty tradition and demonstrates his debt to such masters as Albrecht Dürer, Lucas van Leyden, Pieter Brueghel the Elder, and Rembrandt, as well as the independence of his own inventions. As I said, American museums have provided a wonderful introduction to seventeenth-century painting in Flanders and Holland over the past few years.

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to the recent publication of *Fame & Folly* by Cynthia Ozick (Knopf, $26), portions of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

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Glackens, Sloan & friends: the Ashcan artists' New York

by Mario Naves

Any critic whose name is on the mailing lists of museums and galleries soon becomes inured to the extravagant claims found in press releases. So much so that the most bounteous string of superlatives is likely to be met with little more than a sigh. Yet there are occasions when a press-release statement, made on behalf of an artist or exhibition, is so preposterous that it can cause even the initiated reviewer to blanch. Such a moment came for this writer upon receiving notice of the exhibition "Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan Artists and Their New York"[1] at the New-York Historical Society. In the press release, we are informed that one aspect of the show deals with the Ashcan School's take on "changing gender roles." Only in the politicized art world of the 1990s could it be suggested that stalwart fogeys like George Luks and John Sloan occupy the same ideological turf as Cindy Sherman.

The curators of "Metropolitan Lives" might balk at such a comparison, and it is an overstatement. But if you guessed that the paintings in this show are exhibited as a means of validating its wall labels, you would not be off the mark. "Metropolitan Lives" reduces art to artifact. It presents the paintings, drawings, and prints of the Ashcan School as historical documents overlaid with a polite veneer of politics. The art of Luks, Sloan, George Bellows, William Glackens, Robert Henri, and Everett Shinn is presented alongside postcards of the period, sheet music, brochures, a rattan subway bench, a video monitor playing nickelodeon films, and musical recordings. (Never trust an art show with a soundtrack.) This is not to deny the kitschy charm of the sheet music for "It's Tough When Izzy Rosenstein Loves Genevieve Malone" or a Coney Island gambling wheel populated by six silver dragons. But "Metropolitan Lives" doesn't suffice as art or history. It's a hodgepodge and a skimpy one at that.

The Ashcan School derived its name from the group's paintings of urban life in turn-of-the-century New York. As Oliver Larkin, author of *Art and Life in America*, wrote in 1949: theirs is an art of "types, localities, and incidents to which Americans were conveniently deaf and blind [as subjects for art] . . . drunks and slatterns, pushcart peddlers and coal mines, bedrooms and barrooms." While I would be the last to suggest that Americans (or anyone else for that matter) aren't capable of a willed ignorance,

1 "Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan Artists and Their New York" opened at the New-York Historical Society on May 1, 1996, and remains on view through August 4. The show originated at the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, where it ran from November 17, 1995, through March 17, 1996. A catalogue of the exhibition, with essays by Rebecca Zurier, Robert W. Snyder, and Virginia M. Mecklenburg, has been published by the National Museum of American Art and W. W. Norton (232 pages, $50).

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HOLE in our SOUL

Martha Bayles

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"By drawing out the theme of perverse modernism, [Bayles] has revealed how intellectually derivative much of contemporary American pop mythology is."
—Edward Rothstein, *New York Times*

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this quotation does hand the organizers of "Metropolitan Lives" the license they need for the exhibition's extra-aesthetic interests.

Robert W. Snyder and Rebecca Zurier—the curators of "Metropolitan Lives," along with Virginia M. Mecklenburg—must, one would think, admire the Ashcan School's art. Why else would they dedicate time and effort working on an exhibition such as this? Yet one gets a nagging impression from reading their catalogue essays that they would admire these artists a whole lot more if they were, well, a bit more hip. Zurier and Snyder spend the better part of the catalogue going over the Ashcan School's paintings, checking for bits of political impropriety. This makes for some onerous reading—do Glackens's illustrations really show "little sympathy for people presented as foreign"?—and one wonders if Snyder and Zurier have really seen these paintings at all. There is fretting here, for instance, about the "limited and partial" social vision of the these artists. Is it impolite to suggest that using art to illustrate history (or ideology) is more limited and prejudicial than any of the paintings in "Metropolitan Lives"?

Of course, the Ashcan artists were no strangers to politics. Sloan was a member of the Socialist Party and contributed illustrations to the radical journal *The Masses*, as did Bellows, Glackens, and Henri. But as painters they put art ahead of politics. (Sloan quit *The Masses* in protest over editorial captions that politicized his already political illustrations.) The painters of the Ashcan School were far from hell-raisers, artistically or otherwise, as Mecklenburg makes clear in her fine catalogue essay, and their notoriety as such was largely due to Henri's knack for publicity. Yet, even by the standards of the day, their paintings were traditionally made and well-crafted, qualities that can be traced to the artists' day jobs as illustrators. With the exception of Henri, all of them worked as commercial artists, and their paintings owe as much, and probably more, to the conventions of newspaper and magazine illustration as to the Dutch and

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Spanish masters they revered. So while individual images may recall Hals and Goya, the front page of the *New York Herald* is never far behind.

Whatever else it's meant to be, "Metropolitan Lives" is not intended as an exhibition of art. Anyone wanting an overview of the Ashcan School and its accomplishments will be disappointed by the show's scantiness. Robert Henri was the artistic and philosophical mentor of this group and a notable figure in twentieth-century American art, but he is represented here by only three paintings. Shinn and Luks have some fine pieces on view, but both artists emerge, basically, as accomplished ciphers. Glackens the illustrator is given priority over Glackens the painter, though Bellows's paintings are adequately represented, along with some handsome prints. It is John Sloan, however, who dominates "Metropolitan Lives"; of the eighty-odd pieces here, twenty-nine are his. A more apt title for this show would have been "John Sloan and Friends."

Because Sloan's paintings embody so much of what we think of when we recall the Ashcan School, tipping "Metropolitan Lives" in his favor does make a kind of sense. It helps elucidate the Ashcan School's appeal—and limitations. Sloan was probably the most gifted of all of these artists yet, even at his best, there is a certain dullness to his vision. In his paintings, we always feel the illustrator's acumen for devising pictures and a concomitant effort to get beyond mere craft. Consequently, his compositions and paint-handling seem efficient rather than felt. So while there is much to commend in a smartly constructed image like *Six O'Clock, Winter* (1912) or the Rembrandtesque lighting of *McSorley's Back Room* (1912), the pictures are timorous and somewhat pedestrian. They are, finally, an illustrator's paintings. Sloan's failure, as with the rest of the Ashcan School's, lies in his inability to get beyond the anecdotal. This is why the Ashcan painters aren't major artists so much as solid ones.

The one exception is William Glackens, whose *Fruit Stand, Coney Island* (c. 1898) and *Skating in Central Park* (c. 1910) are of such a high quality as painting that they positively soar above the rest of the work. Despite the trenchant observations found in his fine illustrations, one wishes there were more of Glackens's paintings on display. But, of course, the art here seems beside the point. If "Metropolitan Lives" reveals that there is some documentary value to these artists' work, it does so at the expense of the pictures. Perhaps this is what we should expect from an exhibition that is as much an appendage to its handsome catalogue as the exhibition's paintings are to the curators' theses. I don't doubt that a savvy curator with an eye for painting could put together a show of these artists that would make an effective case for them. But anyone who has a soft spot for the Ashcan School will find "Metropolitan Lives" a most dispiriting affair.

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The media

Blandness & objectivity

by James Bowman

Sad to say, we have not heard much from poor Bernard Goldberg since he made the *faux pas* of criticizing the fairness and objectivity of a colleague at CBS News back in February (see "The Press's Naïve Cynicism," in our March number). "The old argument that the networks and other media elites have a liberal bias is so blatantly true that it's hardly worth discussing anymore," wrote Goldberg in *The Wall Street Journal*—and he promptly disappeared from his regular commentary slot on the "CBS Evening News with Dan Rather." He is now off Rather's show permanently, but it is rumored within CBS that he may eventually turn up in some kind of role on the magazine show "48 Hours."

The president of CBS News, Andrew Heyward, spoke of Goldberg's words as "a real breach of our fundamental trust. Whatever his motives were, the net effect has been extremely damaging among his colleagues; there is a great deal of residual pain and suffering." Where there is pain and suffering one must always, of course, sympathize. Yet it is hard not to notice with some alarm that, as under other totalitarian regimes, the transgressor against correct thinking at CBS has also been required to produce a confession. Goldberg offered this one to the press:

> I've been contrite about this from day one. It was never personal. I swear to God that I never wanted to hurt friends or family. . . . I raised what I considered to be an important issue. What I did was probably very stupid, but I believe what I said. I care deeply about journalism, and I really care about CBS News.

He also dispatched notes of apology both to Eric Engberg, whose report on Steve Forbes's presidential candidacy was the immediate occasion of his essay, and to Dan Rather.

Now does all this display of contrition convince you that there is nothing to his charges? On the contrary, it seems to me; no great exegetical skill is required to see it as a complete confirmation of them. Nor is there any particular reason to be shocked by them. As Michael Barone wrote in the March/April number of *The American Enterprise*: "What is odd is not that mainline journalism has today become partisan again, but that for a long time it could plausibly claim to be objective." Barone's explanation for the interlude of relative objectivity of news reporters is that "the movies and news radio networks of the 1930s and 40s, and the television networks that followed in the 1950s, couldn't support themselves on thin market segments like the New York newspapers of the 1920s. So they aimed to please everyone." As the network news programs, like the few remaining big-city newspapers, have become institutionalized, however, and the reporting of the news has become a "profession," the pretense of impartiality has

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become more and more hollow. "Today," writes Barone, "the claims to objectivity of the mainline press are laughable."

As if in confirmation of Barone's analysis, there comes news from the Pew Research Center for the People and the press of a sharp fall-off in viewership for the network news. On any given evening in 1975, 48 percent of viewers were watching the network news; by 1985, that proportion was 37 percent. Now it is 26 percent. In just the last three years there has been a decline of 30 percent in the number of people surveyed who claim regularly to watch one of the three main network news shows—from 60 percent to 42 percent. And, as a glance at those shows' sponsorship by laxatives and makers of adult diapers suggests, young people (eighteen to twenty-nine) watch them barely more than a third as often as people over fifty. There is some truth to the networks' claim that people now have more news outlets and therefore more alternatives to the network news, but it is hard to resist the suspicion that these trends also have something to do with the fact that the bargain by which the electronic media once traded the luxury of partisanship for the promise of a mass audience has been cancelled.

The well-established decline in newspaper readership over the same period tells the same story. Yet the media continue officially to deny their biases even in the face of the most overwhelming evidence to the contrary—rather in the same way, I fancy, as the tobacco executives they so enthusiastically investigate deny that cigarettes are bad for you. In both cases an admission of the obvious would result in a collapse of their parent companies' stock price. The equivalent of the famous occasion when the chief executive officers of the seven major tobacco companies solemnly swore before a congressional committee that they did not believe their product to be addictive came in April when the Freedom Forum published something called *Partners and Adversaries: The Contentious Connection Between Congress and the Media* by Elaine S. Povich, a former reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*. Buried in Appendix D was a "Survey of Washington Journalists" undertaken by the Freedom Forum in partnership with the Roper Center which revealed that, of 139 journalists and editors in Washington news bureaux, 89 percent voted for Bill Clinton. Only 7 percent supported George Bush. This was perhaps not surprising in view of the fact that only 4 percent were registered Republicans and only 2 percent called themselves "conservatives." Ninety-one percent saw themselves as "liberal" or "moderate."

None of this was reported on the networks, or in *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*. Only the waspish, right-wing *Washington Times* gave the news prominence, in a front-page report by Rowan Scarborough. To Ms. Povich, however, the information contained in her own report was only the occasion for yet more breast-beating about the press's mythical "cynicism." To Mr. Scarborough, she denied that the report offered any proof of journalistic bias. "One of the things about being a professional," she said, "is that you attempt to leave your personal feelings aside as you do your work."

> What I think is true, more people who are of a liberal persuasion go into reporting simply because they believe in the ethics and ideals. . . . Now that sounds kind of Pollyanna. A lot of conservatives go into the private sector, go into Wall Street, go into banking. You find people who are idealistic tending toward the reporting end.

Referring to left-leaning political views as "idealistic" could itself be termed an instance of press bias, of course; but even if we leave that inference aside it does seem remarkable that she would attempt to deny the obvious, that "your personal feelings" inevitably intrude upon your work. Consider, for example, the answers of the survey's respondents to a question about the "Contract with America" of the House Republicans. Only 3 percent were willing to

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characterize it as a "serious reform proposal," while 59 percent called it an "election year ploy." It is simply not credible that such opinions do not influence news reporting about the Contract.

It isn't as if this were the first time that press bias has been documented. The March/April number of *The American Enterprise*, in which Michael Barone's "Return of Partisan Journalism" appeared, summed up the available data from a survey of 1979–80 by Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman for the Research Institute on International Change at Columbia University, which showed that 54 percent of journalists then described themselves as liberal and only 19 percent as conservative; in 1985 a *Los Angeles Times* survey found that 56 percent of the very large sample of 2,703 journalists and editors it surveyed described themselves as "very liberal" or "somewhat liberal" while only 18 percent called themselves "very conservative" or "somewhat conservative." Another summary of the data by David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit of Indiana University in the *Media Studies Journal* for Fall 1992, tried very hard to deny that journalists constitute, as Dan Quayle had charged during that year's presidential campaign, a "cultural elite," out of touch with mainstream America, but even they had to acknowledge that journalists as a body were more than two and a half times as liberal as the population as a whole and a third less conservative.

Yet it is not quite true either to say that the press uses the cloak of "objectivity" to hide a partisan agenda. As Mr. Barone writes, the journalistic mentality "is by no means reliably pro-Democratic, as Clinton White-House staffers will attest, but it is reliably anti-Republican." This is because the biases tend to be stronger on social issues than on narrow political ones. "The major media outlets are fairly openminded on economics," Barone continues, and "open even to some criticism of the welfare state, but overwhelmingly pro-choice on abortion and pro-feminist in general." One result is that, "while respectful to the point of slavishness to the feminist Left, mainstream media organs tend to deride religious conservatives to the point of caricature."

Does this obtrusive prejudice constitute what the Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, calls "a passive conspiracy" of the media to abet President Clinton's efforts to mislead the American people? It is certainly true that, as Gingrich goes on to charge, their idea of penetrating analysis consists "of telling us how clever Bill Clinton is because he says things that are false with élan and flair." But I'm not sure I know what a "passive conspiracy" is, or even if such a seemingly oxymoronic thing is possible. Such language is typical of Mr. Gingrich's penchant for inflammatory rhetoric—that which, if the journalistic conventional wisdom is to be believed, has resulted in his unpopularity, as measured by opinion polls. Luckily for him, at least in this case, no one is paying much attention to what he is saying these days. If the attention of the media were not directed elsewhere by presidential politics, they would no doubt have made much of this "conspiracy" for weeks, and Gingrich would come out of it as badly as he has from most of his tangles with the media.

Everyone who tangles with the media comes badly out of it. Who does not know this? The power to manipulate appearances has become so great, that it is almost suicidal for politicians not to speak in the emollient language required to prevent themselves from being savaged. That is why it is hard not to admire the courage of Gingrich and some of his fellow House Republicans in continuing to say things which they know are going to make them look bad but which they believe are true and need to be said. Likewise, it is hard not to despise the President's shameless manipulation of those appearances, and his incapability of taking an unpopular stand on anything. Even "the liberal media" must feel this way from time to time. Thus it may happen that they will make an effort to notice, as Richard L. Berke did in *The New*

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York Times of May 14, Clinton's clever use of local media during a visit to New Jersey the day before:

> For the Clinton campaign, it was better than paid advertising: uncritical coverage of the President broadcast not only to New York, but to homes in the battleground states of Pennsylvania and New Jersey. To the viewing audience, it was President Clinton who was put on display that evening, not candidate Clinton. . . . Mr. Clinton is rivaling Ronald Reagan's success in using incumbency to produce those flattering images on television. That, in turn, has helped Mr. Clinton encourage the portrayal of himself as above the political fray—more specifically, the intramural party combat—of Mr. Dole and the Republicans.

It was perhaps not altogether coincidence that the next day Mr. Dole resigned from the Senate.

Berke even went so far as to say that "some analysts said in interviews that the advantages Mr. Clinton was enjoying went far beyond those generally afforded Presidents, to the point where the coverage might be giving him an unfair advantage over Mr. Dole." But the "analysts" he quotes (Richard Noyes of the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington and Kathleen Hall Jamieson of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania) attribute no ill will to the media: they think that the unbalanced coverage is the result of Republican divisions left over from the primary campaign. "Republican criticisms of Dole are much more newsworthy than Republican criticisms of Clinton," said Mr. Noyes. But as Garry Wills saw it on the same day's Op-Ed page, it was Mr. Clinton himself who deserved the credit for his treatment by the press—because of his Reagan-like skills of self-presentation:

> Though Mr. Reagan upheld conservative doctrine, he did it in the comforting and inspiring mode that Mr. [George] Lakoff calls liberal. The political scientist Theodore Lowi attributes much of Mr. Reagan's success to this "rhetorical cross-dressing." Mr. Reagan took his manner—optimistic, generous, high-minded—from Franklin D. Roosevelt, that old conservative bugbear. Now, by a deft act of countertheft, Mr. Clinton has taken back Roosevelt's style from Mr. Reagan, who set the recent and remembered standard of verbal performance for a President . . . [Conservatives] sometimes accuse Mr. Clinton of stealing their issues but not really meaning it. In fact, the theft is even more glaring. He has stolen their leader's voice. And he is doing what that leader did—covering one ideology in the costumery of another.

It is a typical stretch for a Clinton apologist like Mr. Wills to characterize Reagan's pleasant and reassuring manner of proclaiming conservative beliefs as being exactly the same thing as Clinton's patently insincere imitation of both manner and belief. Even the subtlety of his brace of scholars will hardly serve to obliterate the clear difference between the two.

The point, perhaps, is that while journalists are rarely so "biased" as to be incapable of responding to politics and politicians on a human level, it takes an academic to be ruthlessly ideological. Even Frank Rich responded interestingly to the controversy over the firing of the radio talk-show host, Bob Grant, by Capital Cities/ABC (which is now owned by Disney) for incautiously admitting that he wished the Commerce Secretary, Ron Brown, dead. As it happened, Mr. Brown *was* dead, killed in an airplane crash in the former Yugoslavia, so the remark seemed to Mr. Grant's corporate masters to be impermissibly tasteless. After making the predictable obeisances to received opinion, however, Mr. Rich wrote that

> the way [Grant] was abruptly yanked from the airwaves last week—in an opaque two-sentence statement, by one of the world's largest media goliaths—also induces the chills. This is

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> an ugly story all the way around. Mr. Grant has been spewing his venom for years, much of it far more tasteless than his recent Brown aside, and yet he was removed only after protesters started targeting Disney, which recently completed its purchase of Capital Cities/ABC, the owner of WABC.

And he goes on to quote the Reverend Al Sharpton as having said to a reporter for the *Daily News* that "WABC ignored us for years. . . . But a multinational corporation like Disney has to respond, because it's more vulnerable."

Thus it seems that the commercial pressures which, in Mr. Barone's account, once made for relative "objectivity" in news reporting have not gone away. But they are now producing, instead of genuine fairness or non-partisanship, nothing more than a craven unwillingness to offend. It is the fault of the culture rather than of the media, I suppose, if it is not offended by mendacity or ideological self-dealing but only by overt expressions of rhetorical hostility or tastelessness. This amounts to what Rich, quoting the First Amendment lawyer Floyd Abrams, called the tendency "to bland up American life." It is this which is constantly getting mixed up with the question of "bias." Consider the case of Howard Fineman, a reporter for *Newsweek*, who was quoted as saying in a speech to a group of cardiologists in April that Bill Clinton's "greatest strength is his insincerity. . . . I've decided Bill Clinton is at his most genuine when he's the most phony. . . . We know he doesn't mean what he says."

The White House was furious and demanded that Fineman not be allowed to report on the presidential campaign. The president's spokesman, Mike McCurry, said: "We find some of those comments objectionable. . . . Journalists that strive for objectivity normally don't say such things publicly." Fineman told Howard Kurtz of *The Washington Post*: "I know that I need to be careful, and I care very much about having a reputation as a reporter and analyst and not as an opinion-monger. I don't think I was making moral judgments here." Instead, he says, he was only trying to show Clinton as an "insincere conservative" and now realizes that "it comes off sounding very cynical when brutally summarized."

Well, there is a good reason for that: namely, that some kinds of "objective" reporting inevitably imply "moral judgments." It may be that to Howard Fineman being an "insincere conservative" is all part of the political game, but most people will not see it that way. A senator from Mr. Clinton's own party, Bob Kerrey of Nebraska, had said much the same thing a month or so earlier. But in Fineman's case, his reportorial "objectivity" seems to amount to a suppression of information which might lead someone, somewhere, to make a moral judgment. Another interesting commentary on the idea of "fairness" and objectivity was provided by a second item in Kurtz's column that day, taken from the Freedom Forum study whose revelations about media politics otherwise seemed not worth reporting. The study found, says Kurtz, that "by a substantial margin, more Republicans than Democrats believe [the major news media] are unfair." Although, he adds, "bucking the trend" was Rush Limbaugh, "whose radio show was deemed fair by 45 percent of Republicans and 15 percent of Democrats."

Now, since Mr. Limbaugh could hardly be more Republican if he were on the payroll of the RNC, the fact that only 45 percent of Republicans called him "fair" suggests that to the others, as well as to the Democrats and, of course, to Kurtz, "fair" means something like: not being so vulgar and obvious as to come right out and say what you think. Mr. Limbaugh may make no secret of his views, but surely he is entitled to them without the stigma of "unfairness" for expressing them? Here, perhaps, the corporate "blanding up" rests upon the American bedrock opinion (than which no American opinion is more bedrock) that everyone is entitled to his opinion. Some-

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how it is "unfair" to be too positive in the statement of one's own opinion, however, for fear that language too forthright might be tantamount to a denial that the other fellow's point of view is as much entitled to respect as one's own.

Or even—dare we suggest?—as *true* as one's own. Which is to say, not true at all but only amounting to a personal preference. It is certainly possible for someone to be a liar objectively, but only if the truth is also objective. And it is here again that the culture lets us down. For at the highest levels, the common man's naïve belief in the intellectual sovereignty of mere opinion has been ratified by our best (implies no moral judgment) and brightest. In fact, among such people, the objectivity of truth is a dead letter. As Stanley Fish has said, this "relieves me of the obligation to be right" and instead "demands only that I be interesting." Thus it seems probable that President Clinton's political strength derives from his insight into the hitherto unrecognized fact that the rest of America is rapidly catching up with Stanley Fish.

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Verse chronicle

Gravel on the tongue

by William Logan

W. S. Merwin's new book is so dreary, I had to recite *Henry V*'s battle speeches just to get through it. Merwin gave up the burdens of punctuation so long ago it's hard to remember he began as a perfectly conventional poet of the Fifties, one of those sons of Auden who lost their way. But who would have thought that the later master of tense, crippling surrealism, who could make a phrase about stars or bones or stones (those Dutch still lifes of the late Sixties) shimmer with numinous life, who could tease a nerve out of the dull flesh of prose, would end as a village explainer, as Stein said of Pound? *The Vixen*[1] doesn't want to be read; it wants to prose its readers to death:

> and now I have come to ask you to say what
> will
> free me from the body of a fox please
> tell me
> when someone has wakened to what is really
> there
> is that person free of the chain of
> consequences
> and this time the answer was That person sees
> it as it is
> then the old man said Thank you for
> waking me
> you have set me free of the body of the fox

Mnemosyne is the evil goddess of these poems: the onslaught of syntax renders the life of a lost world. Merwin lived for years in a village in southwest France, and these poems are laments for the death of old culture (there is something primitive about that region of Albigensian heresies, so close to where the Basques speak Western Europe's one remaining pre-Indo-European language). This is *ubi sunt* poetry filtered through the Romantics, and the last words of the poems are a little thesaurus of belated gesture: *forgotten*, *gone*, *autumn*, *waiting*, *past us*, *rusted over*, *vanishing*, *looking back*, *the only time*, *finished stars*, *late summer*, *already gone*, *going*, *remembered*, *afterward*, *disappeared*, *remember*.

Where once Merwin used line breaks to give mystery to his phrases, now the sentence is pursued with unmediated vengeance, as if form itself were the crime. This style foregoes all the rhythm of attention punctuation confers—of pointing in its other sense. Punctuation shocks, withholds, hesitates, retards, reviews, resurrects. The advantage of a prose landscape without landmarks—the breathlessness, the giddy rush of speech and image—seems small recompense for the losses.

One might argue that Merwin's sentences are at times the imitation of an action: "the wind-scorched leaves . . . whipped in the hissing rush/ over restless litter and cracked ground until the boughs/ groan crash finally snap striking back flailing." They're a textbook example of why imitations are a dead

1 *The Vixen*, by W. S. Merwin; Knopf, 70 pages, $21.

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form of syntax. The technical problem of denoting the end of a thought drove medieval copyists to invent that series of extraneous and interpolated scratches we know as modern punctuation, our miniature collection of dots, slashes, and curls. (Merwin succumbs to capitals, as in the inset passage above, for the direct representation of speech—otherwise it's every sentence for itself.)

Though he describes the tangles of ivy, the flash of streams, these are dreams of experience, what experience would be if it were prettier and bought retail, like wallpaper. The past underlies the present in ghostly palimpsest, but this retrospect without governance almost requires a sentimental cast: otherwise why look so firmly back? Occasionally, there's a whiff of the personal, a bright turn of natural description ("the twisted flags/ of dried irises knuckled into the hollows"). A few historical monologues, and the memory of a local holocaust, show how edgy this style might become. It's easier to forgive a lack of punctuation in our ancestors.

Merwin has already written about this region in *The Lost Upland*, his stylish autobiographical fiction. He is one of our best memoirists—his prose is redolent, modest, attentive—and he is still a translator of great gifts. It isn't simply that his poems are a species of prose—his *prose* is a species of prose, and it's lovely. In his poems the writing is now so wordy and lifeless, so lacking in the virtues of prose knowledge—I've never thought before that punctuation is a moral choice. This run-on, the-sentence-is-everything-that-is-the-case style (like Molly Bloom on Prozac) is an aesthetic decision, not mere laziness. It just looks like laziness.

Sharon Olds has Large, Important Emotions, and some fairly odd ways of expressing them. *The Wellspring*,[2] her fifth book, is a family epic, the life of Sharon Olds from unfertilized egg to wife and mother, from before the cradle to before the grave. Olds has raw, wounded energy; an almost animal directness; a savage way with metaphor—it's hard to know exactly when her lines lapse into the comic-book vulgarity that is her only medium of emotional relation.

Olds is so raptured by family (her book *The Father* was one long autopsy), it almost excuses her rather creepy voyeurism—relentlessly high-minded, as most lowly things are. She invades her parents' bedroom with the cheerful officiousness of a social worker:

> Today, I thought of that blood, rippling out,
> and the blood that seeps up, out of the side
> of a trout when a pressed-down blade breaks
> through,
> silvery salty sweet fish
> of my mother's maidenhead. It was in the
> dark,
> the harsh shantung blinds drawn down, the
> ruffled curtains unloosed at the waist.
> She was naked with a man for the first time,
> the intricate embroidery silks of her
> pudenda moist upright alert
> terrified, thrilled, each hair
> reaching out and curling back, she was
> there in the bed like her own parents,
> there at the center of the world. Now
> she was the loaf laid into the pan
> raw and being fed now into the bright oven.

This must be the poetry Freud had in mind, a poetry completely devoured by the family romance. But it would be a mistake not to admire the confident violation of our well-meant privacies and well-earned proprieties. That gutted trout, for instance, is a bad joke about a bad joke; but the withheld metaphor is as calculated as an analyst's fee. Olds exceeds your worst dreams of "honesty," and it seems to cost her nothing—her poetic voice is cold as Novocain, numb to anything it might say. (Plath and Sexton were mere innocents compared to her.) She's like a girl dancing too long in a peep show—her naked skin has become her clothing. But a loaf in a pan!

For bad taste and preening Isadora Dun-

2 *The Wellspring*, by Sharon Olds; Knopf, 88 pages, $21; $13 paper.

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can passion, for a ballet of steely insecurities and a twinge of moral ugliness, Olds can scarcely be bettered. If she writes of an abandoned farmhouse, it's abandoned because the Army has taken the Japanese-American owners away. We are all on the right side now—it's easy to be, fifty years after the war. What would be hard would be resisting the temptation to secure your moral authority by condescending to the dead, to your parents ("ignorant people"), to those in the grip of war's irrational fears. She's the Tammany Hall of venal sincerity.

She'll write of her son, "I think of your penis, its/ candor and virtue"; or of her mother, "Half of me/ was deep in her body, dyed egg/ with my name on it, in cursive script"; or of a dead gerbil, "trans-/ mogrified backwards from a living body/ into a bolt of rodent bread" ("trans-mogrified" isn't the word she wants, but neither is "bolt"—a bolt of bread!); or, imagining herself inside her father's testicles, "My brothers/ and sisters are there, swimming by the cinerous/ millions" ("cinerous" may be the word she wants, but it's hard to imagine why). She's never gotten over that her children were once inside her—she writes as if she wanted them there still.

There's a great need for erotic poetry in English—our poetry is all emotion without sex (sexual intercourse may not have begun for Larkin until 1963—he was *joking*—but for most poets it hasn't started yet). Olds is our poet laureate of oral sex, and as erotic as an old sock. She reports on her private acts with great élan, but it's like a scratchy old porn movie—there's something sad in the sleaze. She has taken voyeurism a good deal further than most poets—but it's herself she loves watching.

It makes matters worse and not better that Olds is a poet of no mean talent. No one without some of her gifts can be a good poet, but a poet with all of them can still be a bad one. Just when you're caught by a turn of phrase, thinking she's not so dreadful after all, she'll write something that leaves you dumbstruck: "In the middle of the night, when we get up/ after making love, we look at each other in/ complete friendship." It's not like being told about sex by your eighth-grade health teacher—it's like watching your health teacher demonstrate it.

Virginia Hamilton Adair is eighty-three, and the poems in *Ants on the Melon*[3] have emerged from a long self-exile. She seems like an Ovid come home from the Black Sea after everyone had forgotten him, speaking a language slightly fussy, preserving in amber its archaisms and conventions. Adair published poems in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The New Republic* in the Thirties and Forties, so she wasn't working in a vacuum—she had a long and mostly content family life on the edge of academia, and suffered one great tragedy in the suicide of her husband, a historian. She is now totally blind.

Adair was born a little after Elizabeth Bishop and a little before Amy Clampitt; and a reader cannot help remembering, from the circumstances of this belated first volume, that Clampitt didn't publish her own first book until she was sixty-three. Some of Adair is remarkably close to Clampitt: a love of nature and narrow landscapes, of the Wordsworths, of life in London (and travel in general). They are not at all similar as poets—Clampitt was word-drenched and word-deranged, a baroque free-verse poet of great flair and daring (and much repetition); Adair is smaller and mustier, given to whimsy, stultified and arthritic diction, and often placid rhyming. At her worst, she sounds like a parody of a parody of Yeats:

> My life's great tower fallen, from base to rafter,
> Across this deranged bed with its blot of blood,
> Appalling lover, where are the flowers of our laughter,
> The bright river of your thought in flood?

3 *Ants on the Melon*, by Virginia Hamilton Adair; Random House, 166 pages, $21.

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She'll write of surfers "oaring with their arms/ toward the horizon whence comes their hope" or, of a drowned girl:

> No push of pulse, no battle in the blood
> finally disturbed the saline melody
> when last the swell through dissonance of surf
> bore her, loose-fingered and with heavy hair,
> to resolution on the empty shore.

At times you're back at some debutante's 1929 ball, hours after the Crash. Resurrected here are the tones and structures of the period when Adair began to write—not those of early Auden or Stevens or Frost or Eliot, the great exceptions, but of the mass of poets now forgotten, who thought themselves original and wrote like everyone else.

Too much of Adair's work is fustian amateur poetry of that bygone age. But some of her graces come from that age—enough time has passed for those old conventions to seem fresh again. There's an inconsequent clumsiness in most of her poems, but much verve, too. She sets a melon rind on an anthill, and sees it blacken

> with antmen out of hand
> wild for their melon toddies
> just like our world next year
> no place to step or stand
> except on bodies.

The "toddies" are giddy (her sprightliness is almost Bishop's), but they prepare that sudden decent into Swiftian ferocity in the last line. You think you understand the limitations of this poet, and it takes you aback. She has a good ear for speech (a conductor says, "If you hungry, we wire/ ahead to a widow lady, fixes/ a fine box supper for you-all"), but almost never employs it (an ear for speech is not the same as an ear for diction—we're often deaf to our own diction). What Adair has presented in lines and stanzas, and once or twice in almost a whole poem, is a gift whose demands were callously ignored.

The biographical afterword, by her kind and solicitous friend Robert Mezey, suggests just what one *ought* to think, that by not publishing more poems Adair escaped the need to uphold a reputation or respond to reviewers, to preserve favor or court expectation. I would say that it kept her from the jolt of challenge, that it insulated and stifled her. What would one give for a few more poems in the voice of her Eve?

> Not sure how I got there,
> But a perfect location: smogless,
> Free food & 4 unpolluted rivers.
>
> The man I took to at once—
> Our bare bodies made us forget
> Our parents (if we ever had any).
>
> Adam was given a desk job, naming
> Species; I typed the name tags,
> Kept the files, fixed coffee, dusted,
>
> Found the best plants for food, picked
> Perma-press leaves for rainshawls
> & little aprons to keep off gnats.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The snake was sure I'd ratted on him
> & bit me. Adam stomped him. Now his kids
> Can't play with our kids anymore.
>
> We were evicted from Eden Gardens.
> Those goons with the flamethrower!
> You better believe we went quietly.

Despite the near-religious wonder elsewhere (there are some dire poems about Zen), the moony ghost-struck plangency, and a diction nearly ludicrous, Adair has more jazzy surprise—though always, always in fragments!—than poets half or a quarter her age. Piecemeal there's a rare spirit at work.

Mark Doty's *My Alexandria* won awards from the National Book Critics Circle and the *Los Angeles Times*, was a finalist for the National Book Award, and most recently won the T. S. Eliot Prize in England. I'm perhaps the only reader who disliked it,

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who thought it a bland and dispiriting example of contemporary free-verse Life and Times. Being gay and writing poems is an important occupation just now, but wasn't it an important occupation for Whitman, and Housman, and Auden? Being gay didn't stop Auden from writing good poems; I don't know why it should stop Mark Doty.

Atlantis [4] is a confident performance—confident in the way that comes in middle age to poets who have won a few awards (that's when overconfidence comes, too). The poet begins to trust the contrariness of his impulses, begins to speak against himself. Doty has a life, and the life is written to the terms of his art:

> My salt marsh
> —mine, I call it, because
> these day-hammered fields
>
> of dazzled horizontals
> undulate, summers,
> inside me and out—
>
> how can I say what it is?
> Sea lavender shivers
> over the tidewater steel.
>
> A million minnows ally
> with their million shadows
> (lucky we'll never need
>
> to know whose is whose).

This has his self-absorbed, whimsical, and irrelevant grace, taking pleasure in the passages of nature. The voice, in rhetorical questions and parentheses, keeps breaking in on itself. "I could go on like this," he says a few lines later, and the trouble is, he does. He doesn't know when to stop talking, and the poems natter on, little shivering shallows of talk. His poems tend to be rather pointless walks through town or visits with friends, walks and visits so sweetly dopey you feel mean for pointing it out—at best they're little descriptions of nature in a sub-Marianne Moore mode, without the refreshing and cruel eye. His poems have that kitchen-pantry-by-Ralph-Lauren look.

AIDS hovers at the edge of these poems like an unbidden guest. Doty doesn't stand on a soapbox—he lost his lover to the disease and in many poems seems just bewildered and stunned. His friends are victims, but he doesn't convey their lives especially well—their stories are sad, professionally sad, but they're also dull. We've become accustomed to the narrative of AIDS, to the arguments and denials, the rapid diagnosis and slow grief, to the whole architecture and religion of the disease—all the privacy has leaked out (when a subject has been too long public it becomes professional). The pressures are all toward genial confession; and when confession is genial, it isn't confession any more—it's public relations.

> *This is what I imagine will happen,*
> *the spirit's release.* Michael,
> when we support our friends,
> one of us on either side, our arms
>
> under the man or woman's arms,
> what is it we're holding? Vessel,
> shadow, hurrying light?

The poet and his friends suffer devastating loss—your heart goes out to them; but he still isn't able to turn loss into poetry, he's only able to make it "poetic." And this often involves a revelatory flash of light. After *day-hammered*, *dazzled*, *haloed*, *brilliance*, *gleam*, *flashing*, *brightness*, after *flame* and *brilliant* and *flickering* and *coronas* and *licks of fire*, after *haloed*, *luminosity*, *brilliant*, *glitter*, *sunstruck*, *luminosity*, *radiant*, *iridescent*, *rainbowed*, *iridesce*, after *shimmer* and *flashing* and *rainbowed* and *brilliant* and *gleaming*, you're only a dozen pages into the book, with Roget's barely thumbed through.

The light show, the clutter of rhetorical questions (over a hundred of them, often huddled together as if they might get lonely), attempt their dramas in a poetry es-

4 *Atlantis*, by Mark Doty; HarperCollins, 101 pages, $22; $12 paper.

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sentially passive: in the face of death, Doty has a deadpan flatness and loss of affect (other poems are scored by Rodgers and written by Hammerstein, as if at any moment Doty might get down on his knees and sing "Oklahoma!"). In a momentary gleam of description ("veiled like the marsh/ gone under its tidal sheet// of mildly rippling aluminum") or an act of sexual cruelty, you see the harshness of desire that the contemporary rhetoric is holding back; but then it's on to "you can see every bloom's// the multiple expression/ of a single shining idea,/ which is the face hammered into joy" or a talking lighthouse.

Poetry is a species of fiction, but also a species of autobiography. The reader is dispossessed of the facts, and the dispossession makes poetry more permeable to myth and parable. Louise Glück has taken sustenance from myth in a poetry sometimes starved of all else: her hollow-voiced language is as full of self-conscious angst as a Bergman movie. *Meadowlands*[5] is about the death of a marriage, played out against the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

In Glück's poems, myth must be considered broadly, as the devastation of historical narrative by religious longing—Christian, pagan, what matters is the refraction of the sins of the present through the sins of the past. She is an underhanded and suggestive poet, and when she titles a poem "Cana" you cannot expect to find a Jesus there. Cana was the site of a wedding where a miracle occurred, a minor and perhaps silly miracle by a god: water was changed to wine. The poem talks vaguely of forsythia, an estranged lover (or husband, as other poems make plain), of "emblems of light/ which are more powerful, being / implicitly some earthly/ thing transformed." This collapses the notions of a god made man, a wedding at which the sign of that godhood is manifest, the fall toward martyrdom that the first miracle signifies, and the transformation toward which all religion (and all love) yearns: one thing turned into another is the silence beneath the sacraments. It's a lot to suggest that your husband assumes the guise of Christ, but Glück is subtle in her means and bitter in her suggestions.

The dozen poems at the heart of *Meadowlands* are brute dialogues of marital squabbling and pure meanness, more vengeful than anything Glück has written:

> I said you could snuggle. That doesn't mean
> your cold feet all over my dick.
>
> Someone should teach you how to act in bed.
> What I think is you should
> keep your extremities to yourself.

And again:

> You should take one of those chemicals,
> maybe you'd write more.
> Maybe you have some kind of void syndrome.
>
> You know why you cook? Because
> you like control. A person who cooks is a
> person who likes
> to create debt.

These lines are the husband talking, but the wife is no better. They're quarrelsome, childless, deeply unsympathetic adults (though they don't act like adults)—you can imagine what the sitcom will be like, but it would have to be written by Albee and star Taylor and Burton. Little said by this couple is said without intent to wound (they're like Greek warriors, armed to the teeth). In a dozen lines you learn more about them than you ever want to know; they're appalling, but they're also sad and ridiculous.

Glück seems to realize how airless and closeted these scenes are, and much of the rest of the book returns to the marriage through Odysseus and Penelope, the straying husband and patient wife. Glück also assumes the voices of Circe and Telemachus, as if she were, or wanted to be, at once wife, mistress, and the abandoned child of her own childless marriage. Even at her most

5 *Meadowlands*, by Louise Glück; Ecco Press, 61 pages, $22.

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passionate, Glück is a thin and bloodless poet (each character allows a different form of self-pity). Glück doesn't seem to mind that casting her husband as Odysseus and herself as Penelope might be grandiose. Freud meant that we enacted the myth, not that we became the myth.

Glück's own style, a deadening management of the senses, steals the emotional resonance from these marital remains. Her harshly beautiful lines are the living impulse of claustrophobia—they lack image, figure, anything to move them beyond their own small means. When she tries to analyze despair, she sounds like an issue of *Psychology Today* ("I realized I *was*/ actually a person; I had/ my own voice, my own perceptions"). The poems work hard to evade responsibility for this moral landscape. They seem, in their trashy tabloid way, more like "Oprah" than opera—Odysseus and Penelope are just one more couple who need counseling.

As a title, *The Spirit Level*[6] is a typically Heaneyesque bit of play: a carpenter's worn tool, wood and brass and a bubble in liquid (the dust jacket makes it so), it is also a supernatural idea, the very plane or level of the spirit, even a moderation of spirit (Heaney is our Lucretius of spirit). Heaney, his Ireland still half medieval, half modern, loves the moment when the religious wells up within the secular—it is the political disaster of Irish life. In Heaney there are always two worlds, and his idea of carpentry would be a device to make the canted spirit level again.

Heaney has become an institution now, and dangerous in the way institutions are: his Nobel Prize marks him wrongly as a spent force (Eliot called the Nobel "a ticket to one's own funeral"). As a poet ages he has to fight against his own inclinations, even his own past (not just what has made him what he is, but the made past of his writing).

Heaney's poems start almost anywhere, like the unguarded and mild banter of conversation. We've seen these poems before, in other versions: elegies for friends (the "held-at-arm's-length dead"), turns on classical themes, poems about the land (plowing up a field often means plowing up a poem about poetry), transformations of everyday objects. Heaney can be as routine and predictable as Hardy, but as shocking and bewildering as Hardy, too. The routines are part of the deception (sometimes even the deceptions are part of the deception). A poem about a whitewash brush, so mild and homely Heaney seems the Andrew Wyeth of domestic interior, builds slowly toward an unbearable murder. The whitewash is a metaphor ("Of course," you want to mutter—but it's not *just* a metaphor): in Irish politics, what would have been pastoral is too often elegy.

Even his classical themes (his long sequence "Mycenae Lookout" is a camp version of the *Agamemnon*) speak from the Greek past to the Irish present:

> The little violets' heads bowed on their stems,
> The pre-dawn gossamers, all dew and scrim
> And star-lace, it was more through them
>
> I felt the beating of the huge time-wound
> We lived inside. My soul wept in my hand
> When I would touch them, my whole being
> rained
>
> Down on myself, I saw cities of grass,
> Valleys of longing, tombs, a wind-swept
> brightness,
> And far-off, in a hilly, ominous place,
>
> Small crowds of people watching as a man
> Jumped a fresh earth-wall and another ran
> Amorously, it seemed, to strike him down.

The "time-wound" is a bit of Heaney's guff, but how strange and unlikely the ending! The quiet manner of these poems is often part of their secret working.

Heaney can still rise to a lyric uproar when necessary—his "Downpour, sluice-

6 *The Spirit Level*, by Seamus Heaney; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 82 pages, $18.

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rush, spillage and backwash" delight in the warble and wastage of language. He'll still pile adjectives atop each other ("slabbery, clabbery, wintry, puddled ground," "Grey-blue, dull-shining, scentless, touchable"), as if tapping bricks into mortar—though he isn't a laboring man, he has a feel for doing a job of work.

You can get a little tired of the country sentiment (the last poems are all wet weather and moss), of the good and uncanny nature of things; but Heaney always reminds you there is evil in things, too. He has a remarkable way of opening up the sides and floor of a poem:

> It was more
> Hans Memling's light of heaven off green grass,
> Light over fields and hedges, the shed-mouth
> Sunstruck and expectant, the bedding-straw
> Piled to one side, like a nativity
> Foreground and background waiting for the
> figures.

This looks easier to do than it is to do. The painter's moment is the moment during, or just after; Heaney wants the moment just before. Heaney is rarely a visual poet; it's his other senses that are preternaturally active. Many of these poems turn on a sound, or a taste, or a texture, and his language is all gravel on the tongue: we haven't had as personal and craggy a poet since Auden (I'm talking about the verse, not their good looks). If at times the writing seems reflexive, that's not a bad thing for a poet in middle age to be: his verse has become as natural as breathing.

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Books

The rehabilitation of Robert Frost

by James W. Tuttleton

I don't mind being made controversial. No sweeter music can come to my ears than the clash of arms over my dead body when I am down.

—Robert Frost to Lionel Trilling, June 18, 1959

It was Frost's custom to prefix to successive issues of his collected poems "The Pasture," an invitation—originally published in *North of Boston*—into his pastoral world of bucolic delights:

> I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
> I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
> (And wait to watch the water clear, I may):
> I sha'n't be gone long.—You come too.
>
> I'm going out to fetch the little calf
> That's standing by the mother. It's so young,
> It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
> I sha'n't be gone long.—You come too.

This charming and seductive little poem I have always felt to be misleading. It promises something very interesting to see, without any labor; it guarantees a diversion, but one not overlong in its attraction; and it offers us the companionship, even the protective beneficence, of a kindly speaker who seems to know both what his work is and what our limits are in watching him do it. It is on the basis of poems like this—and there are a great many of them—that Frost attained the reputation of being a genial farmer-poet. Most readers of poetry in his time did not tire of watching Frost at his upcountry work. For remarkable poems came to record his rural chores: "Mending Wall," "After Apple-Picking," "Mowing," "Putting in the Seed," "Going for Water," "The Grindstone," and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

But Frost's pastoral world, once we are in it, can get as murky as the leaf-strewn spring, as full of risk as the field of the fragile calf that must be rescued from the coming winter blast. His pastoral verse always has a simple surface, compared to that of Eliot and Pound, but it clears suddenly into unsuspected depths. To get to the bottom of Frost requires a great deal of work and can easily become an occupation in itself. And, as Lionel Trilling remarked at Frost's eighty-fifth birthday banquet in 1959, he is hardly the benign grandfatherly figure we sometimes suppose him to be.

Brought up on the verse of the Romantic and Victorian writers, as well as the New England "Fireside Poets," Robert Frost (1874–1963) was well-trained in the classics and found the matter of Lucretius's *De rerum natura* to be as contemporary as that of Wordsworth and Emerson. The conventional Romantic view was that nature is a symbol of spirit, the manifestation of the divine—that the world, as Goethe put it, is "the living garment of God." Emerson and Whitman were convinced that man's soul had its counterpart in the oversoul and that nature was the manifest of this benignant

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spiritual energy irradiating the phenomenal world. The great task of the Romantics was to find the linked meaning between the facts of nature and the world of spirit. The "doctrine of correspondences," as it was formed by Wordsworth and Coleridge, Emerson and Whitman, generated an explosion of symbolic poetry in which the elements of nature—the daffodil, the rhodora, the humblebee, the song of the nightingale, and the elemental leaf of grass—all opened a mystical doorway into a transcendent state of being.

Frost at times seems to share in this Romantic faith in nature's beneficence. In "Dust of Snow," the speaker's depression is suddenly lifted when a crow, up in a tree, shakes down on his head a branchload of snow. Through such absurd events, nature seems to perform its unexpected therapeutic ministrations. In "For Once, Then, Something," the speaker sees something through and beyond mere phenomenal appearance, an object at the bottom of a well—"a something white, uncertain,/ Something more of the depths." Then the clear, lucid object at the bottom of the well is blurred and blotted out when a drop falls into the well and ripples the water. "What was that whiteness?/ Truth? A pebble of quartz?" The poet is not sure. But what in fact was seen—a material stone or the metaphysical rock—remains a matter of ambiguous certitude: "For once, then, something." Finally, in "Two Look at Two," a man and woman—nearing the end of their nature-walk—come upon a pair of deer (a doe and buck) who stand and look back at them, over a stone wall. The deer gaze at them with an intensity that matches their own dawning understanding. Although the deer and the couple are divided by the wall, the exchange of glances makes the couple feel "As if the earth in one unlooked-for favor/ Had made them certain the earth returned their love."

Does earth return our love? Frost was the child of Darwin's age, and the scientist's description of the struggle for survival and nature red in tooth and claw showed him, as well as Tennyson, intimations of a darker and more sinister force at work. It was this that provoked what Frost called his "lover's quarrel with the world." In "Storm Fear," the enormous destructive power of a howling snowstorm produces such fear that the speaker seems emotionally overpowered and is nearly lured out into it, to his own destruction. Frost projects the storm as a "beast" that says "Come out! Come out!" And he observes that "my heart owns a doubt/ Whether 'tis in us to arise with day/ And save ourselves unaided." Perhaps the most terrifying of all his nature poems is the brilliant sonnet "Design," where he writes about a small achromatic threesome: a white heal-all (the flower is usually blue), a white spider, and a white moth that the lurking spider has just killed. If Christian theologians—like William Paley in his *Natural Theology* (1802)—had argued that the attributes of the Deity can be inferred from the design of His creation, Frost finds in His creation evidence of a terrifying pattern of death-dealing. What steered these three white objects to their fateful rendezvous?

> What but design of darkness to appall?—
> If design govern in a thing so small.

Like Melville's meditation on the white whale in *Moby-Dick*, "Design" is a reflection on the ghastly and sinister implication of whiteness. It is hard to imagine which is more appalling (that is, likeliest to turn *us* pallid or white with fear): a providence that intended such destruction as befalls the moth; or an absence of all purposive agency in the world—sheer chaos (on at least the microlevels of life).

Such inner tensions and contradictions in the man highlight the new portrait of the poet by Jeffrey Meyers.[1] He has very little to add to previous biographies of Frost, it seems to me, but he does have a pronounced point of view about Frost the

1 *Robert Frost: A Biography*, by Jeffrey Meyers; Houghton Mifflin, 424 pages, $30.

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man, and he does make some claims about Frost's private life that have not heretofore been elaborated. To these I shall turn in a moment.

Meyers offers a straightforward account of the facts of the poet's life, which are in little dispute. Born in San Francisco in 1874 to a pair of transplanted New England journalists, Frost was brought back East at age eleven, after the death of his father, and the family lived for a time with his grandfather. His mother was a school teacher, and Robert was excellent in his studies, graduating in 1892 from the Lawrence (Massachusetts) High School as co-valedictorian. His chief academic rival, Elinor Miriam White, was also his high-school sweetheart; and, after a somewhat rocky courtship, they were married in 1895 and had a robust family of several rowdy youngsters. Frost was admitted to Dartmouth in 1892, then dropped out to teach; then he entered Harvard in 1897 but dropped out in 1899. There was never enough money, especially as fatherhood came on. He finally settled down on a thirty-acre farm in Derry, New Hampshire, that had been willed to him by his grandfather. After some years of farming, teaching school, and professing psychology at the State Normal School in Plymouth—while writing his poems by night—the unknown, struggling poet, at thirty-seven, took his family off to England.

This move in 1912 had a decisive effect on Frost's career, bringing him to the attention of Pound, Yeats, Edward Thomas, and a great many English and American writers and editors of verse. Pound described Frost to Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry* magazine, as "VURRY Amur'k'n, with, I think, the seeds of grace," and he sponsored the publication of his work. Frost's first two volumes, *A Boy's Will* and *North of Boston*, were likewise very well received in England, and he returned to the United States in 1915 as something of a celebrity. John Evangelist Walsh has engagingly described this phase of Frost's life in a narrowly focused but very readable biography called *Into My Own: The English Years of Robert Frost, 1912–1915* (1988). In any case, Frost's public reputation grew year by year: during his lifetime he was awarded four Pulitzer Prizes in poetry; schoolchildren memorized his poems; his readings were usually sold-out; and in 1961 President-elect John F. Kennedy asked Frost to write a poem for the inauguration. He was the first American poet to be so honored, and it has been downhill at presidential inaugurations ever since.

Walsh's *Into My Own* is not the "definitive life" of Frost. That term (however doubtful) is usually reserved for Lawrance Thompson's three-volume *Robert Frost* (1966–1976). This book was based on thirty years of intimate acquaintance with the poet. Thompson was in continuous correspondence with Frost and often stayed with him for long stretches of time. In fact, in one of his letters Thompson told Frost that "the simple truth is that I love you." But truth is never simple: Thompson's biography is an appalling instance of the old saw that familiarity breeds contempt. Far from being the friend Frost thought him, Thompson actually detested Frost, felt chronically put upon, and paid off every single slight in a savage hatchet job on the poet.

Thompson's Frost is given to childish tantrums, paranoid fears, jealous outbursts, murderous envy of other poets, and suicidal melancholia. If, as many thought at the time, the genial Frost was America's greatest poet, for Thompson the poet was a nasty piece of work needing a ruinous exposure. Many readers took Thompson's work at face value, as he was a respected Princeton professor. So, on the basis of the Thompson life, Helen Vendler pronounced Frost a moral "monster"; David Bromwich remarked that "a more hateful human being cannot have lived"; and the egregious Harold Brodkey claimed that Frost's "demonic vileness" actually "showed in his face."

Frost's friends were of course appalled at Thompson's virtual assassination of the poet's character. Many of them complained vociferously, arguing that they could not recognize in this life the man they knew.

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But, since Thompson's life rested on such a solid research base, including a large collection of letters that Thompson controlled (it was he who produced the *Selected Letters* in 1964), their protests were dismissed as mere cronyism.

Much of the serious work about Frost in the past two decades has been devoted to the rehabilitation of Frost the man. Perhaps the most important volume in this regard has been William H. Pritchard's *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered* (1984), which originated in the recognition that Thompson's unattractive portrait is "so much at variance with what many who knew him (including myself, briefly) remembered of him." Pritchard is exceptionally generous to Thompson, even while pointing out Thompson's manifest failure to explain how a moral monster could have elicited such loyal friendships, produced such beautiful poems, or attained such an international following.

Something of this same wish to rehabilitate Frost animates Jeffrey Meyers's new life. As he remarks in the preface:

> Like most readers, I accepted the conventional view, mainly propagated by Thompson, that Frost was a mean old bastard and that his nature poetry was accomplished but superficial. But I was dissatisfied with Thompson's mass of facts, which I had never been able to finish, and was convinced that Frost, a handsome and vigorous man, must have had a sexual life after his wife's death. I thought Frost deserved a more concise, lively, balanced, honest and perceptive treatment.

Balanced the book is. In this it is quite unlike Meyers's *Scott Fitzgerald* and *Edmund Wilson*—two "pathographies" that overstressed the novelist's alcoholism and the critic's sex-obsessed foot fetishism. Meyers finds much to admire in Frost the man, while not blinking at his dark mood swings and periods of elemental personal torment. Even the writer's occasional anxieties over mental illness, which afflicted a great many members of the Frost family, are treated more compassionately here than in *Manic Power*, Meyer's life of the deranged poet Robert Lowell and his circle. We come away liking Frost much more than Thompson will let us. But, as usual, the Meyers book is a rush to judgment, and the perfunctory treatment of the great poems—"Mending Wall," "Birches," "After Apple Picking," and "The Road Not Taken" among them—fails to make plain why we should care about Frost the man and the verse he produced.

As the quotation above suggests, however, Meyers was in search of Frost's sex life as a widower; and naturally he finds a love affair to flaunt and a mistress to name in Kay Morrison, Frost's personal secretary, who was "his manager, mistress and muse for the last twenty-five years of his life." A quarter-century younger than the poet, and married to boot, Kay Morrison is here presented—on very scant evidence—of simultaneously sleeping with her husband Ted Morrison, Frost, the literary critic Bernard DeVoto, and even biographer Lawrance Thompson. Meyers observes of the bed-hopping secretary that "Kay, I believe, felt great power by manipulating a number of distinguished men while assuring her place in literary history."

But aside from her *Robert Frost: A Pictorial Chronicle* (1974), whatever place Kay Morrison has in literary history seems largely to have been supplied by Jeffrey Meyers. There is not a great deal of documentation in support of Meyers' remarkable claim that the poet, then in his mid-sixties, commenced a secret love affair that extended into his seventies and eighties! Lawrance Thompson had little to say about Kay Morrison in his biography. But for Meyers this is proof that her affair with Thompson gave her power over him, and made it possible for her and her husband, Ted, to gut all references to her affair in the Thompson life. But that hardly makes sense if, as Meyers claims, she wanted to assure herself a place in literary history. Still, although very few pertinent communications of hers survive, Meyers has pieced together

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a baroque tale of multiple sexual intrigues that is bound to sell copies of the book.

But much more unfortunate than the gossipy tone of this life is Meyers's coarse reduction of Frost's verse to a reflection of some biographical event with which it has no evident connection. There isn't space here to note the many instances of this dismaying treatment of the poems, but perhaps one will do—the striking little couplet "The Secret Sits" from *The Witness Tree*:

> We dance round in a ring and suppose,
> But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

Frost packed into this comic little verse an intellectually serious comment about our religious rites and doctrines, the vanity of our confident theological suppositions, the enigmatic mystery of God (the central fact in our lives), and the divine omniscience that eludes human understanding. But what, for Meyers, is this poem about: you guessed it—the secret love affair with Kay Morrison.

Frost was a popular writer, and his verse was printed and reprinted in scores of editions and anthologies. He himself supervised the printing of his individual volumes, as well as the *Complete Poems* of 1949, which contained most of the verse he had composed in eleven volumes over more than three decades: *A Boy's Will* (1913), *North of Boston* (1914), *Mountain Interval* (1916), *New Hampshire* (1923), *West-Running Brook* (1928), *A Further Range* (1936), *A Witness Tree* (1942), *Steeple Bush* (1947), *An Afterword* (1949), *A Masque of Reason* (1945), and *A Masque of Mercy* (1947). At seventy-four most poets are finished, but after the appearance of the *Complete Poems*, Frost continued to write, producing *In the Clearing* in 1962, with that wonderful couplet:

> It takes all sorts of in and outdoor schooling
> To get adapted to my kind of fooling.

In the three decades since Frost's death in 1963, the standard edition of his verse—at least for most readers—has been *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (1969), edited by Edward Connery Lathem. This is the Holt, Rinehart and Winston text that has dominated the scene and been so often excerpted in such anthologies as *The New Oxford Book of American Verse* and *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. Lathem was a long-time friend of Frost, a Dartmouth College librarian, and the co-editor of *The Selected Prose of Robert Frost* (1966), as well as other works connected to the poet. In any case, his devotion to Frost was so well known that the Thompson biography was dedicated to him.

But the Lathem edition of the poems has provoked constant grumbling and sporadic textual criticism since it first appeared. The recurrent complaints at length led the poet Donald Hall to produce a detailed collation of all the printed texts of Frost. And in "Robert Frost Corrupted," published in the March 1982 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Hall pointed to ample evidence showing that Lathem had corrupted the texts of Frost's poems by arbitrarily adding commas, removing commas, adding and removing hyphens, compounding words, altering dashes, adding question marks, removing and adding parentheses, etc. Some 1,117 of Lathem's changes in the "accidentals" (or punctuation of the poems) had no relation whatsoever to the poet's known final intention.

Lathem justified his alterations as necessary to clarity and correctness. But their effect in fact was to alter the meter and rhythm of the poems and, in some cases, to obscure or even change their meanings. Such changes were disastrous for a poet who insisted that he achieved his distinctive cadences "by skillfully breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre." As he remarked in a letter to John Cournos in 1914, he liked to get into "strained relation" the "very regular preestablished accent and measure of blank verse" and "the very irregular accent and measure of speaking intonation": "I like to drag and break the in-

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tonation across the meter as waves first comb and then break stumbling on the shingle." Given the poet's view of the relation of syntax, punctuation, and meter, Hall rightly argued that "a responsible literary scholar should be commissioned to edit a variorum edition of Frost's poems" that would "re-establish Frost's intended punctuation." He may have had in mind Richard Poirier, whose *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (1977) had established Poirier as one of Frost's most perceptive critics.

It would be pleasant to report that the new edition of Frost's poetry in the Library of America, edited by Mr. Poirier and Mark Richardson, undertook to offer such a variorum, but this is not the case.[2] It would be even better to report that the Library's Frost volume was a complete re-editing of the text of the poems prepared according to the copy-text principles of the Center for Scholarly Editions. (After all, in mangling the Richard Wright volume, the editors—evidently including Mr. Richardson—felt fully justified in abandoning the principle of reprinting the standard text. Instead they re-edited Wright's work so as to include manuscript passages Wright had rejected in the final printed texts.) But the Library's Frost is not re-edited from the ground up either.

What we have in the Library of America volume is in fact merely a reprint of the 1949 *Complete Poems* and *In the Clearing* (1962). We must be grateful for small favors, however, for these texts are more trustworthy than those of Edward Connery Lathem. Here the Library of America also gives us some ninety-four uncollected poems, including seventeen printed here for the first time. Frost's three plays—*A Way Out*, *In an Art Factory*, and *The Guardeen*—are also included. And the volume is rounded out with eighty-eight pieces of prose—most of them based on the texts in Mr. Richardson's 1993 Rutgers doctoral dissertation, "The Collected Prose of Robert Frost: A New Critical Edition." These include essays such as "The Figure a Poem Makes," lectures, introductions to collections, and passages about the art of poetry found in the letters. The result is a rich compendium of Frost materials.

There are no gems in the unpublished verse, and it goes without saying that Frost was not a playwright. But Frost's characteristic wit and humor, his distrust of politicians, his interest in science and other such topics do come through in the unpublished material. Here is "The Seven Arts" (1917), an uncollected little limerick on politically correct critics in the era of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, and *The Seven Arts* magazine (which had lost its funding over its left-wing pacifist line in World War I):

> In the Dawn of Creation that morning
> I remember I gave you fair warning.
> The Arts are but Six!
> You add Politics
> And the Seven will all die a-Bourneing.

2 *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays*, edited by Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson; Library of America, 1,036 pages, $35.

Apologia pro Newman

John Henry Newman
The Idea of a University.
Edited by Frank M. Turner, with contributions from Mr. Turner, Martha McMackin Garland, Sara Castro-Klarén, George P. Landow, and George M. Marsden. Yale University Press, 367 pages, $35; $18 paper

reviewed by Paul Dean

In 1851 Archbishop Cullen of Armagh wrote to John Henry Newman, since 1845 the most celebrated English convert to Catholicism, asking his advice on appointing staff to the proposed Catholic University of Ireland, adding that he hoped Newman "could spare time to give us a few lectures on education." This was a natural request,

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Newman having been, in his Anglican days, a renowned (and not entirely popular) tutor at Oxford, who had agitated for reform of the system there, so as to make tutors more directly the moral guardians of their pupils. Cullen could hardly have foreseen how amply his invitation would be answered. The volume published in 1873 as *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated* was a composite of the original lectures—delivered in 1852 and printed with some alterations and additions later that year—and *Lectures and Essays on University Subjects* (1858). There have been two major scholarly editions of *The Idea* in recent years, by Ian Ker (Oxford, 1976) and Martin J. Svaglic (Notre Dame, 1982); Ker has also given us, in his *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford, 1988), the best account of Newman's inner life we are ever likely to have. This Yale edition, acknowledging indebtedness to those predecessors, prints all the discourses from the last revision of the text Newman made, together with four of the *Lectures and Essays*. There are also an editorial preface, with questions for students, and five interpretive essays which display a mixture of admiration and bafflement as instructive, in its way, as the lectures themselves.

To appreciate the importance of *The Idea* we must recognize the limits as well as the scope of Newman's undertaking. Oxford was his Platonic ideal of a university but he was not so naïve as to hope for a simple transplant. Moreover, Oxford was an Anglican institution, and Newman's brief was to devise a Catholic one. This, in his view, entailed two things: the advocacy of a sovereign place for theology in the curriculum, and the inculcation, within that framework, of a spirit of intellectual liberalism—Oxford manner and Catholic matter, one might say.

Consciously faking the etymology, Newman began from the point that a university without theology is a self-contradiction because its scope is not universal: "such an Institution cannot be what it professes, if there be a God." Theology is not merely one among many academic subjects, it is their fountainhead. Yet if it is above them, it is no less their equal as a discipline—an exercise of the reason, not a pious effusion of sentiment, and dealing in dogma, not opinion: "Religious doctrine is knowledge, in as full a sense as Newton's doctrine is knowledge." Each academic subject searches in its own way for truth, but truth in its highest sense is an organic whole: hence theology, which is both an individual subject and the center of coherence for all other subjects, is the most comprehensive route to truth, "not only a portion, but a condition, of general knowledge." Newman does not deny the multifacetedness of the university curriculum, but seeks to prevent its collapse into undifferentiated pluralism. He would have been disappointed at the way things have turned out, for "the idea of a multiversity," as George M. Marsden remarks in his essay, "seems a contradiction in terms," particularly when we remember that Newman uses the word "idea" in a technical sense explained in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, published in the year of his conversion.

> The idea which represents an object or supposed object is commensurate with the sum total of its possible aspects, however they may vary in the separate consciousness of individuals; and in proportion to the variety of aspects under which it presents itself to various minds is its force and depth, and the argument for its reality.

The last six words mark the difference between this vision and an acceptance that knowledge is merely subjective or relative. Newman holds that theology completes and keeps in equilibrium all other branches of knowledge: conversely, without theology those branches will attempt to pass beyond their bounds, arrogating to themselves that power of stating ultimate ends and universal truths which belongs to theology alone. As Ian Ker notes, Newman's image for the relationship between theology and other subjects is not a ladder but a circle; their synthesis depends on their symbiosis.

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Thus, when we come to the fifth and most famous discourse, "Knowledge Its Own End," we have to read it in light of this preceding train of thought. At first it seems free-standing, abounding in formulations and insights which have become classics of pedagogy: the advantage to the student that he "profits by an intellectual tradition which is independent of particular teachers"; the description of liberalism as "a habit of mind . . . of which the attributes are, freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom"; the insistence that "such is the constitution of the human mind, that any kind of knowledge, if it be really such, is its own reward"; the ardent evocation of such knowledge as "not a mere extrinsic or accidental advantage, which is ours today and another's tomorrow, which may be got up from a book, and easily forgotten again" (so much for examinations!) but rather as "an acquired illumination . . . a habit, a personal possession, and an inward endowment." The close is a hymn to the goal of a genuine education:

> To open the mind, to correct it, to refine it, to enable it to know, and to digest, master, rule, and use its knowledge, to give it power over its own faculties, application, flexibility, method, critical exactness, sagacity, resource, address, eloquent expression . . .

Owen Chadwick, in his brilliant short study *Newman* (1983)—unaccountably omitted from the bibliography of this edition—pithily says of this discourse that "no one ever sang a lovelier song in praise of education for its own sake. And in the same moment no one ever denied so eloquently its natural crown." For here Newman forces us to see the limitations of the argument that such knowledge is sufficient in itself; the cultivation of intellect, he warns, if "an object as intelligible as the cultivation of virtue," is yet "absolutely distinct from it." Here we need to notice a passage, again from the *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, in which he characterizes theological liberalism with such force, mercilessness, and vigorous compactness of expression that we reel as if stunned by a physical blow. Liberals, he says, variously believe

> that truth and falsehood in religion are but matter of opinion; that one doctrine is as good as another; that the Governor of the world does not intend that we should gain the truth; that there is no truth; that we are not more acceptable to God by believing this than by believing that; that no one is answerable for his opinions; that they are a matter of necessity or accident; that it is enough if we sincerely hold what we profess; that our merit lies in seeking, not in possessing; that it is a duty to follow what seems to be true, without a fear lest it should not be true; that it may be a gain to succeed, and can be no harm to fail; that we may take up and lay down opinions at pleasure; that belief belongs to the mere intellect, not to the heart also; that we may safely trust to ourselves in matters of Faith, and need no other guide.

That is Newman's warning to the Church of England. It would give him no pleasure to know that he had prophetically composed its obituary.

Newman's view of the function of liberal knowledge is then utterly unlike Matthew Arnold's "sweetness and light"—Arnold whose serene confidence in himself as a theological thinker, displayed in books whose pitiful inadequacy makes them an embarrassment, enabled him to dismiss Newman's view of the world as "impossible"! For liberal knowledge confers "the power of viewing many things at once as one whole"; its nature is organic. Mere accumulation of information is not real knowledge; the educated mind analyzes and synthesizes its materials rather than passively receiving them; philosophy is a higher intellectual activity than pragmatism. Frank M. Turner aptly remarks that Newman believes in the "transcendent uselessness" of the university—a position now beyond the comprehension of most people but one for which Newman feels no need to

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apologize, taking for granted the error of utilitarianism and retorting unanswerably that "what has its *end* in itself, has its *use* in itself also." Not that he advocated dilettantism; he insists that a truly educated individual is also, because of his breadth of experience and flexibility, potentially an invaluable member of society.

Education is seen by Newman, as by many other Victorian social critics, as a means of enlightenment and moral improvement for the masses; but the inadequacy of philanthropy per se is suggested by the well-known description of the "gentleman," which closes the eighth discourse. This is too often quoted out of its context, which makes plain that Newman finds the gentlemanly ethic fundamentally flawed; as Ian Ker puts it in his biography, Newman distinguishes not between "intellectual culture and religion" but between "the *religion* of intellectual culture and religion itself." Liberal knowledge, he concludes, must be conditioned and directed by the Church; without this safeguard the search for truth will become mere secular enlightenment, and the search for the beauty of holiness mere aestheticism. Science and literature, although not inimical to the Catholic faith, are no substitutes for it (which puts into perspective Darwin on the one hand and Arnold on the other); science has no business with morality, literature no business with perfection.

Some of these thoughts are taken up in two of the later lectures. In "English Catholic Literature" Newman concedes the ineradicable Protestant character of English letters. It must be admitted that his literary-critical powers are not strong, and, strangely, he does not seem to have considered the possibility that Shakespeare himself might have been a Catholic; nor does Sara Castro-Klarén, who wonders in her essay how a Catholic student can read "the greatest writer of the English Protestant tradition." However that may be, the Chair of English Literature at the Catholic University was established as early as 1856, well ahead of Oxford and Cambridge (its first occupant, ironically, was Thomas Arnold, Jr., a recent convert to Catholicism). In "Christianity and Physical Science" Newman develops a particularly subtle account of the compatibility of scientific discoveries with the principle of revelation. Physics has nothing to say about final causes, while the deductions from the doctrines of the early Church are not additions because they are, at however many removes, implicit in the premises. He would have been fascinated by the current theory that time did not exist before the Big Bang—a suggestion essentially anticipated by St. Augustine in Book XI of the *Confessions*, written in around A.D. 400.

The Idea of a University is not, then, just a classic in the history of educational thought; it is as much a theological work as any Newman wrote. This point is taken by the Yale commentators with varying degrees of clarity. Indeed, their anxiety and perplexity about his assumptions verge sometimes on the comic. Martha McMackin Garland is happier once she has established him, after his conversion, as "a member of a discriminated-against minority." She is impatient of his rejection of utilitarianism, which she calls "a peculiar inversion of common sense"; she cannot understand why he showed so little interest in research (which has *practical* consequences—such as tenure). Frank M. Turner, as hinted above, is more open to Newman's reasoning, noting wryly that this one man performed for the Catholic University the functions which would now be put into the hands of a team of public-relations consultants and appeals directors—with what results we can guess only too well. "His concepts and ideals," Turner ruefully adds, "stand like Banquo's ghost at the feast of the modern university community." In that community the humanities are often dominated by a phalanx of theorists who hate and fear human personality, and have no belief in beliefs. George M. Marsden quotes from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* an academic historian's statement that "the notion that

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scholars' personal beliefs are compatible with their academic interests is 'loony.'" Theology will not stand much chance against that attitude. Yet George P. Landow's essay reminds us that Newman's ideals have a more implacable enemy, and one whose advance seems unstoppable—the electronic university, that parody of Newman's "intellectual tradition independent of particular teachers," which abolishes collegiality and positions each scholar in monastic isolation before a computer screen, interfacing with hundreds of faceless fellow keyboarders. No glib reaction to this development is possible. One remembers Isaac Asimov's prophetic story "The Fun They Had" in which a brother and sister, tired of being educated at home by computer, discover one of the few remaining textbooks and contemplate it with awe and wonder.

Like many another theorist, Newman found the realization of his ideals taxing. He became Rector of the Catholic University of Ireland in 1851 and held office for seven turbulent years. The university did not formally open until 1854. Newman divided his time between Dublin and Birmingham, where he was Superior of the Oratory. Cullen, who had originally enlisted his support, became Archbishop of Dublin and his enemy, maligning him to the Roman authorities as so many among the hierarchy, suspicious (and jealous?) of his credentials, were to do. Student numbers and quality of teaching staff at the University fluctuated; there were political as well as religious pressure groups to propitiate; the existence of the rival, and more prestigious, Trinity College was a constant threat; there were financial difficulties. Yet Newman established the University and made it work. When he resigned the rectorship he still had thirty-two years to live; he had yet to write the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864) and *The Grammar of Assent* (1870), both, on any showing, more important works than *The Idea*. Nonetheless he included that book, along with *The Grammar* (but not the *Apologia*) in 1869 among the five "constructive" works he had written.

It is only the complete lack of interest in theology, which is one of the most depressing characteristics of our time, that has prevented Newman's being recognized as one of the greatest minds the nineteenth century produced. Almost certainly he would fail to be appointed even to a junior faculty post in a modern university.

Krazy Kat culture

Michael Kammen
The Lively Arts: Gilbert Seldes and the Transformation of Cultural Criticism in the United States.
Oxford University Press,
495 pages, $35

reviewed by Mark Steyn

I began Michael Kammen's biography of Gilbert Seldes after breakfast. Before breakfast, I'd read my morning newspaper, the Montreal *Gazette*, a sober broadsheet which has just started a weekly rock-video column—and nothing as humdrum and utilitarian as reviews of new rock videos, but rather a provocative and ongoing debate on issues arising and trends discernible therefrom. The connection between Seldes and *The Gazette*'s latest signing is made explicit in Kammen's cumbersome title: *The Lively Arts: Gilbert Seldes and the Transformation of Cultural Criticism in the United States*. Perhaps we would have got here one way or another, but it's still doubtful whether, without Seldes's pioneering efforts, twenty-three-year-old female college graduates could have expected (or would have wanted) to make a living commenting on the intellectual themes arising from rock videos.

Sorry, I should have said "music videos." Until fairly recently, "Music" in respectable journals used to mean fellows like Mozart and Beethoven. In *The Gazette*'s and most other arts pages now, "Music" means The Dead Presidents and Niggaz With Attitude,

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and Wolfgang and Ludwig have been reclassified as the specialist sub-genre "Classical Music." Before Seldes was born (1893), a distinguished music critic was someone who had studied sonata form and soprano *passagio*. Since Seldes's death (1970), a distinguished music critic has been someone who has studied the social significance of rap lyrics and the postmodern attitudinal irony of grunge haircuts, and can tell you which recording studio Tupac's producer was shot dead outside of.

Seldes would, probably, have disclaimed credit for such a legacy, and it has certainly not brought him fame: I'm sure *The Gazette*'s lady video opinion-former has never heard of him—as far as I can tell, she doesn't seem to have heard of anything before 1981, which is perhaps not such a disadvantage in her new post. But this, too, is part of Seldes's bequest. Before the Great War, criticism was vertical: that's to say, critics specialized and pontificated on literature or music or fine art in terms of the traditions from which they arose. Seldes's generation made criticism horizontal, inventing the concept of the "cultural critic"—the fellow who, today, roams the cultural landscape and is capable of discussing Quentin Tarantino in terms of the Cranberries' new album or the season finale of "Friends" in terms of the seminal Mountain Dew commercial. That would have depressed Seldes. A Harvard man, he served as managing editor of *The Dial*, and, in 1922, introduced America to "The Wasteland." His most influential book—indeed, his professional epiphany—was a collection of essays from 1924 arguing the merits of vaudeville, Tin Pan Alley, comic strips, musical comedy, and slapstick movies, and its title, *The Seven Lively Arts*, became a kind of brand leader for Seldes, serving in one variation or the other as the label for his columns in *Esquire* and *Park East* and his talks on WNEW. But the book which followed *Lively Arts*, *The Stammering Century* (1928), was devoted to his second great enthusiasm, "the necessity of historical knowledge and perspective." In the rush to embrace one of his obsessions, we have trampled the other into oblivion. Nobody should expect a *user* of pop music to put too high a premium on "perspective": only a fool would stand around at the senior prom and say, Well, yeah, it's okay, but it doesn't have the harmonic invention of Stephen Foster, so, if you don't mind, I'll sit this one out. But, if we are to argue the merits of the song as art, we should be able to—and we don't.

"Perspective" is such a debased concept in cultural commentary that the editors of *The New York Times Magazine*, in a special issue celebrating their centenary, didn't seem to notice that they'd actually produced a celebration only of the last forty years. As for "historical knowledge," that crops up only in the most bogus way. I once interviewed Bob Fosse about his films and choreography, and, at some point, I mentioned something about the influence of commedia dell'arte. "Congratulations," said Fosse, looking at his watch. "You held out twenty-three minutes. Most of the fancy interviewers get to commedia dell'arte within the first ten." It was years later that I discovered it was Seldes who first hit upon commedia dell'arte as the all-purpose historical precedent: over his long career, he applied the term to Chaplin and the Keystone Kops, Jerome Kern and Irving Berlin, vaudeville and silent movies, and TV sitcoms. To be fair, Seldes also adapted a famous commedia piece—Carlo Gozzi's *The Love of Three Oranges*—for the Harvard Dramatic Club in 1926. But, for the most part, he was pioneering what became the standard approach in pop-culture criticism: the need to find an intellectual safety net for what regular folks just do without thinking.

Most of us like the pop songs and movies and comic strips of our generation, and the ones that mean most do so usually for non-artistic reasons: it's the film we saw on our first date, the song we danced to at our wedding. Irving Berlin's daughter, who was a childhood pal of Seldes's son, once men-

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tioned to me that the Seldes parents never sent their kids to dancing lessons. But, if he disdained the traditional functions of pop culture, Seldes was no different from anybody else in his tastes: in the Twenties, he liked Al Jolson and Fanny Brice and George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* comic strip; in the Sixties, he had less (if anything) to say about Bob Dylan or Lenny Bruce or *The Incredible Hulk*. I would have liked to have known his thoughts, in 1970, on what had become of his "lively arts," but Kammen doesn't tell us. I would have quite liked to have known what film he saw on his first date or the song he danced to at his wedding, but Kammen doesn't tell us that either: indeed, the death of Seldes's wife rates no more than an asterisked footnote on page 317, which, even for a critical biography, seems a touch austere. (Seldes disliked the manner in which radio commercials intruded on the news, and objected to hearing of the passing of Lady Astor thus: "A great lady died today. More on that after this message"; Kammen's footnoted brush-off is, I think, the academic equivalent.)

For the last few years, there's been an increasing trickle of think-pieces by today's graying baby-boom rockers either bemoaning the wretchedness of today's pop music or expressing perplexity at the way the kids seem to find Hendrix and Dylan and the Stones as boring as the infant rock critics once found Perry Como and Guy Lombardo. But, as a prototype pop-culture warrior, Seldes's own enthusiasms are instructive: they are mainly generational. No matter how persuasive his analysis, Fanny Brice as Baby Snooks would not seem funny if NBC ran it instead of "Seinfeld" this week. Kammen himself quotes hardly any of Seldes's insights into individual practitioners, an unspoken recognition of a forlorn truth: some of his favorites have endured (the Gershwins, Rodgers and Hart) while many others (Joe Cook, *Mutt and Jeff*) have not, but, in either category, their fate owes little to Seldes. Moreover, the best evidence of Seldes's irrelevance to their fate is his own biographer, for, after immersing himself in his subject's entire *oeuvre*, Kammen has emerged with not the slightest interest in any of Seldes's passions: "Throughout the war, Seldes prepared the program notes, usually for jazz concerts," he writes, the war in question being the one that began in 1939. "He wrote with special appreciation and pride for performers like Bix Beiderbecke." Bix died in 1931. It wasn't quite the transformation Seldes had in mind, but Kammen's approach leaves you in no doubt: today, cultural criticism is about the criticism rather than the culture.

Kammen doesn't quote it here, but there is a fine essay Seldes wrote for *Theatre Magazine* in 1924, prompted by the reunion on Broadway of Bolton, Wodehouse, and Kern, which gets to the nub of the matter: "It is a pity that you cannot explain or justify delight. Conversation would be so much more amicable if you could. As it is, the friend of your heart or the wife of your bosom, who seems to agree with you on every significant thing in the world, suddenly announces that she cannot abide the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, and the dead silence that follows indicates that divorce is rapidly setting in." Pop culture exists to delight us, and that is the only justification it needs. If it fails to delight, no amount of justification or explanation will commend it to us. It's worth noting that, for all the pressure on the public from an ever proliferating army of Zeitgeistmeisters, popular taste seems to have evolved hardly at all: at the end of the century, the biggest-selling pop records (Whitney Houston's devotional ballad, "I Will Always Love You"), the best-selling airport novels (*The Bridges of Madison County*), the highest-grossing motion pictures (*Sleepless in Seattle*) differ only in the details from their turn-of-the-century predecessors, from "After the Ball" or *The Merry Widow* or the novels of Gene Stratton-Porter. Left to its own devices, the public prefers much the same sentimental romantic fantasy in substantially the same forms as it always has. Each week, the editors of the Arts and Leisure supplements

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pose the question: What's new? And the truthful answer is: nothing.

If the Seldes school of cultural criticism has had a negligible impact on popular taste, what then is it *for*? When Van Wyck Brooks initiated the highbrow/lowbrow debate in various essays beginning in 1915, the various levels of brows under discussion were the public's: mail-order book companies took up the designations with advertisements demanding to know, *"Are we a nation of low-brows?"* It's revealing, though, how quickly these definitions came to apply not to the audience but to the art itself. As the old arguments are thrashed out by Kammen, and brow levels fluctuate from high- to low- to middle- from page to page, I found myself recalling Irving Caesar's splendid middle-section to his 1926 hit "Crazy Rhythm":

> When a highbrow
> Meets a lowbrow
> Walking along Broadway
> Soon the highbrow
> He got no brow
> Ain't it a shame
> And you're to blame.

There's the history of American art in eight bars: when high art meets low art, soon the high art ain't got no art; when Roy Lichtenstein meets a comic book action hero, the comic book isn't diminished by the encounter, but the "artist" is. "The real problem," noted Louis Kronenberger at a 1952 *Partisan Review* symposium, "is how to avoid contamination without avoiding contact." But, in transforming cultural criticism, Seldes also wound up transforming our cultural vocabulary: what passes for high art now is invariably discussed in terms of its points of contact with pop culture; seduced by those crazy rhythms, the highbrows have become culture's limbo dancers, ever more desperate to please. Perhaps it was inevitable. At that same symposium, Joseph Frank pointed out that the "European intellectual minority has no sense of guilt at not being part of mass culture." In a monarchical society, it is undoubtedly easier to maintain a hierarchical culture. And, in an age when policy positions on everything from the gasoline tax to abortion wait until the pollsters have crunched the relevant numbers, it's difficult to argue why culture should be exempt: in such a world, why shouldn't the best music or the best book be simply what's Number One? Why are we surprised that our high culture is, like a soft-cover self-esteem bestseller, spineless?

But, in fact, it's worse than that. In his book *The Great Audience* (1951), Seldes suggested that American "folk and popular art" were distinguished by the fact that "both were readily comprehended, romantic, patriotic, conventionally moral." Does that sound like the kind of popular art you read about in the newspapers? Not at all. Seldes wrote about comedians as comedians, composers as composers. But most of his successors have lacked either the patience or the technical knowledge to do that. In their place, they've offered a discussion of pop art in terms of its social relevance—or, more accurately, its anti-social relevance. And, year by year, that practice has spread remorselessly so that it now, in Kronenberger's apt word, contaminates our understanding of high culture, too. "In a very real sense," writes Kammen, beginning with a sloppy, meaningless phrase of which he's inordinately fond, "[Seldes] can properly be regarded as a progenitor of the discipline known today as cultural studies." But cultural studies is not a discipline, only a modish means of applying the same trite social observations divined from gangsta rap to Shakespeare and Conrad and anything else that takes your fancy. Again and again, in this century's sorry progress, Irving Caesar has been proved right: the highbrows ain't got no brows. All the brainiest people in this story—the Ivy League colleges, the leading critics, the arts establishment—reached across to the wilder shores of popular culture and brought back only what was most diseased and rotten. The resilience of the lowbrows, in with-

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standing our society's cultural leaders, is remarkable and admirable.

In a very real sense, as Kammen would say, the casualties of the process Seldes set in motion include both the discipline of criticism and American high art itself (admittedly a delicate flower). But the third casualty seems set to be pop culture itself. As the popular arts are studied and analyzed ever more avidly, they wind up chasing each other round in circles. The cult stud of the cultural studies circuit is Quentin Tarantino, whose film *Pulp Fiction* is endlessly dissected in colleges all over the country. But the film is itself a product of cultural studies: every shot in it, every scene is lifted from some other pop-cultural artifact of the last twenty years. In *Vanity Fair*, in 1922, Seldes wrote that vaudeville was "the only genre I know which can live by burlesquing itself." It couldn't, though. Vaudeville died, as did slapstick, revue, and musical comedy. Today, Quentin and his hordes of Taranteenyboppers can only make movies that look like other movies, pop records that sound like other pop records. Struggling to crawl out from under the incessant bombardment of "cultural studies," the lively arts aren't lively anymore.

Cadences of Aran

David M. Kiely
John Millington Synge: A Biography.
St. Martin's Press, 305 pages, $23.95

reviewed by Richard Tillinghast

The Irish have never known quite what to make of John Millington Synge (1871–1909), a major stalwart, with Lady Augusta Gregory and William Butler Yeats, of the Irish Literary Revival and a director of the Abbey Theatre, which produced his plays. His best-known work, *The Playboy of the Western World*, a satirical farce that still manages to remain unclassifiable as to tone and intention, brought its author notoriety when it opened in Dublin in 1907. Nationalist reviewers found the play "dreadful," an "offensive production," and a "sordid, squalid, and repulsive picture of Irish life and character." Audiences' negative reactions led to disruptions of performances.

Like many members of the Protestant Anglo–Irish governing class, Synge was fascinated by the customs and speech of the Catholic peasantry. A fluent speaker of Irish, he found something in the musical cadences of the language, its color and extravagance of expression, that he could render in a Hiberno–English that imitated the speech he heard among the wayfarers in his native Wicklow, and especially among the fisherfolk, weavers, publicans, and plain people of the Aran Islands.

W. B. Yeats took credit in his autobiographies for having steered Synge in the direction that looks in retrospect almost preordained for him to fulfill his artistic destiny. "I said, 'Give up Paris. . . . Go to the Aran Islands,'" Yeats wrote—though there seems to be some question as to whether his memory of their encounter in Paris was accurate. This has, in any event, become the accepted version of how Synge happened to start spending time on the Aran Islands, listening to storytellers, listening to the *séan-nos* ("old-style") singers, and playing his fiddle in the kitchens and around the hearths of the Aran cottagers. Yeats creates in his great elegy, "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," where he recalls friends who have died, an unforgettable thumbnail sketch of Synge:

> And that enquiring man John Synge comes
> next,
> That dying chose the living world for text
> And never could have rested in the tomb
> But that, long travelling, he had come
> Towards nightfall upon certain set apart
> In a most desolate stony place,
> Towards nightfall upon a race
> Passionate and simple like his heart.

The playwright celebrates these "passionate and simple" Aran Islanders not only for their theatrical way of speaking—forceful

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and fanciful both—but also for an amoral vitality underlying the starched cassock of Irish Catholicism, a kind of paganism which he defiantly asserts in the face of the nationalists. Defending in theological terms his not altogether flattering view of the peasantry—that there is as much vice as virtue in the ordinary Irishman—Synge wrote:

> One would hardly stop to assert a fact so obvious if it had not become the fashion in Dublin, quite recently, to reject a fundamental doctrine of theology, and to exalt the Irish peasant into a type of almost absolute virtue, frugal, self-sacrificing, valiant, and I know not what. There is some truth in this estimate, yet it is safer to hold with the theologians that, even west of the Shannon, the heart of man is not spotless, for though the Irish peasant has many beautiful virtues, it is idle to assert that he is totally unacquainted with the deadly sins, and many minor rogueries.

The "heart of man" that Synge exalts in his plays is emphatically not "spotless," but full of passion and animated by vivid conflicts that make his characters, largely drawn from the Irish peasantry, unforgettable. On the other hand, Synge was appalled by the new and staunchly patriotic Catholic middle class that was taking over around the turn of the century in Ireland: "There are sides of all that western life," Synge wrote in a private letter,

> the groggy-patriot-publican-general shop-man who is married to the priest's half-sister and is second cousin once-removed of the dispensary doctor that are horrible and awful. . . . I sometimes wish to God I hadn't a soul and then I could give myself up to putting those lads on the stage. God, wouldn't they hop!

But Synge did have a soul, one that responded warmly—with love but not reverence—to the plain folk of the west of Ireland. For the Irish Literary Revival there were only two classes worth contemplating: the aristocracy and the peasantry. It would be up to Joyce to scarify the soul of urban middle-class Ireland. Yeats in "Under Ben Bulben" issued to his confreres the following heady challenge, defining their mission:

> Irish poets, learn your trade,
> Sing whatever is well made,
> Scorn the sort now growing up
> All out of shape from toe to top,
> Their unremembering hearts and heads
> Base-born products of base beds.
> Sing the peasantry, and then
> Hard-riding country gentlemen . . .

To some this is snobbery. Contemporary Ireland rejects it utterly. But for Yeats and Synge at their best, it defines a literature of ineffable nobility, an aesthetic Yeats calls as "cold and passionate as the dawn."

The critic and historian Leo McNamara has claimed, only half for effect, that the *terminus ante quem* of the Middle Ages in Ireland was 1950. Yeats and Synge were given the rare opportunity to experience the crumbling edges of an ongoing Medieval culture, while at the same time having at their disposal the tools to present it to a contemporary audience.

The aristocracy that so entranced Yeats did not interest Synge even though, or perhaps because, his people were typical of this class of Englishmen who had come to make their fortunes and to rule in Ireland. His great-grandfather had been master of Glanmore Castle, with an estate of some four thousand acres in Wicklow. Given this background the Synges were oddly evangelical in their religious leanings, members of an obscure group called the Plymouth Brethren. The family produced five bishops and an archbishop.

The Anglo–Irish story is one of grand pretensions, lost fortunes, bankruptcy, and making-do. Synge's father, a barrister, died of smallpox when his son was an infant, leaving the family in somewhat reduced circumstances. A crisis of belief during his twenties accompanied his study of Darwin. As a young man, Irish nationalism became his religion. "Soon after I had relinquished

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the Kingdom of God I began to take a real interest in the kingdom of Ireland," he later wrote with unusual self-knowledge. "Patriotism gratifies Man's need for adoration and has therefore a peculiar power upon the imaginative sceptic." By the time he arrived at the height of his powers and wrote *The Playboy* and his five other plays, Synge had tempered his youthful enthusiasm enough to view his subject, the Irish peasant, in a more balanced light.

Yeats's piece of advice, "Irish poets, learn your trade," should perhaps be supplemented with another admonition, which Yeats himself, Joyce, Beckett, O'Connor, Heaney, Muldoon, Mahon, and others have followed: "Irish poets, get out of town." After his youthful love affair with the west of Ireland, Synge traveled and studied in Europe, assisted financially by a tiny inheritance. The aptitude for languages he had already exercised by learning Irish at Trinity College served him in good stead on the Continent, where he became fluent in German and then in French. He was living the bohemian life in Paris when Yeats "discovered" him, according to the story, rescuing him from the possibility of being just another minor Symbolist poet. Having absorbed the avant-garde at its sources in Paris and London during the years modernism was bubbling up underneath the dominant bourgeois culture, Synge was in no danger of approaching Irish culture uncritically or conventionally.

David M. Kiely, whose first book this is, has to his credit written a non-academic biography directed at the general reader, and his biography will have a wide appeal. I am not always convinced by his innovative methods, which are clearly designed to make his rather enigmatic subject come alive before our eyes:

> See Synge sitting in the Atlantic Hotel, overlooking the harbour at Kilronan. . . . Yeats insists that Synge is here on his recommendation: "I said, 'Give up Paris. . . . Go to the Aran Islands.'" But Yeats remembers this in hindsight. Sometimes Yeats has a creative memory; sometimes Yeats believes his own myths.

Like a good, docile reader, I have attempted to see Synge sitting in his hotel, but I don't get far, because Synge is a hard man to picture. The use of the present tense, which is meant to lend immediacy to the story, succeeds merely in being annoying. I find it hard to entertain the notion of Yeats alive, perhaps because this book inspires little confidence that its author has the breadth of knowledge and understanding fully to comprehend Yeats in his complexities. Critics—not to mention the poet himself—have had so much to say about Yeats and his myths that the bland assertion, "sometimes Yeats believes his own myths," seems facile. At a point like this I am inclined to mumble, "Tell me something I don't already know."

This opening formula, with its very postmodern imperative, perhaps suitable for a screen treatment, is repeated often throughout the book, right down to the moment of Synge's funeral: "See the hearse and its four black horses halting at the gates of Mount Jerome cemetery. See the mourners alight from the carriages," etc. Synge's short life was, tragically, a constant and losing battle against ill health. He struggled with hay fever, bronchitis, asthma, influenza, and finally and fatally, Hodgkin's disease.

Kiely is informative on the playwright's health problems and romantic aspirations and provides the historical background. But a reading of the book suggests that he lacks the literary background to guide the reader effectively through Synge's writings. Of the following passage, he comments, "It cannot have escaped Yeats's notice that almost every line that Bride [a character in Synge's early play *When The Moon Has Set*] utters is written in blank verse."

> BRIDE: My uncle is a bit queer too, one time and another. I'm thinking it was him your honour seen this night upon the roads, for he

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> does be always walking round like yourself, God bless you, a fine handsome man, and it's two years now since we seen him.

Kiely proceeds to print the speech out as if it were poetry, but in trimeter and tetrameter lines, suggesting that he doesn't know what blank verse is. I gather he means that the speech has a roughly iambic rhythm. On the next page he tells us that in the west of Ireland, "storytellers are judged as much by their lyrical verbosity as by the content of their tales." Is verbosity ever a praiseworthy quality in a storyteller? Perhaps fluency or facility or inventiveness is what he has in mind.

Solecisms and inaccurate formulations of this kind make this book resemble too many biographies that one sees—biographies that look like they were assigned by publishers or written on contracts wangled by agents or worked up by writers in search of material. In great biographies, on the other hand, it is always clear that the biographer has an obsession with his subject, that another person's life has gripped his soul and will not let go.

Turning from the biography to Synge's masterpiece, *The Playboy of the Western World*, is like the difference between eating a frozen Lean Cuisine entrée and a fresh salmon steak and potatoes grilled over hardwood. The play's very title is a stroke of genius, striking and yet tantalizingly ambiguous. "The Western World" includes within its resonance both the far-western reaches of Ireland and, more widely, the civilization in which we live and breathe.

The play's effect has to do with the audience's perception of the ironic tension between how things are understood within a provincial Irish setting and how they might be understood in the larger Western World. What exactly is the connection between murdering your father and being a "playboy"? Our laughter is uneasy: the play violates in a very nervy way the taboo against patricide. Among its delightfully farcical moments are the scenes where the "playboy," Christy Mahon, is lionized in a small community in Mayo because he has distinguished himself by murdering his father. The villagers' traditional courtesy becomes hilarious in view of what Christy has supposedly done:

> SARA: And asking your pardon, is it you's the man killed his father?
>
> CHRISTY: I am, God help me!
>
> SARA: (taking eggs she has brought) Then my thousand welcomes to you, and I've run up with a brace of duck's eggs for your food today. . . .
>
> SUSAN: And I run up with a pat of butter, for it'd be a poor thing to have you eating your spuds dry, and you after running a great way since you did destroy your da.
>
> CHRISTY: Thank you kindly.

Synge evidently was an unusually private man, and I don't fault his biographer much for not having been able to illuminate his inner life for the reader. Perhaps, to paraphrase Faulkner, Synge's best biography would be brief and to the point: "He wrote the plays and then he died."

Of caliphs & sultans

Bernard Lewis The Middle East: A Brief History of the Last Two Thousand Years. Scribner, 433 pages, $30

reviewed by Alain Silvera

The distinguished scholar Bernard Lewis has written a gem of a book, eminently readable and full of wonderful insights and brilliant aperçus. It combines narrative and analysis in just the right proportions and embraces the whole sweep of the history of the Near and Middle East, starting as far back as late antiquity. The study then moves forward, step by step, through the far-flung

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empires of the caliphs and sultans to the more recent emergence of the Arab world, after a long period of subjection and passivity, to independence and self-assertion. Professor Lewis concludes his book with some parting thoughts, elegantly and persuasively presented, on the reasons for the Middle East's present uneasy confrontation with the challenges posed by European (and more recently American) modernity.

Spreading his canvas even more widely than the subtitle of the book would suggest, Lewis sets out to recount in vivid and telling detail the past glories and present discontents of the peoples who have lived and flourished in the heartlands of Islam, their politics and institutions, their societies and economies. Beginning—as is fitting for a work conceived on such a time-scale—with the advent of Christianity, he ends with the sequel to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Along the way, he ranges far and wide over an enormous expanse of territory that stretches all the way from the eastern approaches of the Iranian plateau to the foothills of the Atlas, from the Danube basin and the mountains of the Caucasus in the north to the tip of the Yemen in the south. Lewis shows with authority and affection how the men and women who populate history tried to work out their own destiny over time, until the impact of such Western notions as nationalism and self-determination brought about the collapse of their traditional ways and undermined their age-old sense of self-awareness and collective identity.

One of the advantages of adopting such wide-ranging perspectives, which extend well beyond the chronology of the area as commonly defined by Arabists, is that Lewis can afford to give due weight to the legacy of the past and to many of its more elusive ramifications. Iran, for instance, emerges, again and again, as a model for emulation and a source of attraction. Our attention is also drawn to the recurring influences radiating from such distant lands and cultures as those of Central Asia and China, linked to the area by ties of trade and commerce, notably the silk route. Then there are the repeated invasions, from the Golden Horde and Mongols to the Tatars and Turks. The ruin and devastation produced by the Mongol onslaught in the thirteenth century is compared and contrasted with the more familiar story of the Crusades and with the repercussions of Western imperialism in our own time.

Thus the growth and development of the peoples and countries of the area are described not only on their own terms and for their own sakes (although they remain of central importance throughout), but as part of a much larger process of contact, change, and adaptation that extends over many centuries and several continents. To cite but one or two examples out of many: the residual legacy of Oriental despotism, traced all the way back to pre-Islamic Egypt and Sassanid Persia, for instance; or the continuing resiliency of a Byzantine autocracy running parallel with the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates in their heyday, as well as with the Turkish Sultanate that challenged and ultimately replaced it. These powers are shown to have shaped and reinforced an authoritarian, autocratic streak growing out of an Islamic creed, one rooted in the Arab experience in Mecca and Medina. Despite the appearance it gave of uniformity, Islam managed to achieve unity and diversity in a symbiotic balance that stands out as a unique achievement in the history of civilization—one certainly never equalled by China or India, to say nothing of Western Christendom. Also unique in shaping the self-consciousness of the Islamic polity is that the rhythms and patterns of its history have tended to be discontinuous, fragmented and diffuse, with little to connect the pre-Islamic past and its vestigial pagan remnants to its present dilemmas and perplexities.

In addition to offering other striking and provocative observations on the vicissitudes of the internal history of Arabs, Turks, and Persians over more than a millennium, the book contains an intelligent and lively discussion of the region's troubled relations

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with the West. Documenting the successive phases and processes of the loss of power—from the second Turkish siege of Vienna in 1683 and the humiliation a century later of the Treaty of Kutchuk Kainardji at the hands of Catherine II of Russia, until the collapse of the Ottoman Empire—the book culminates in the Middle East's present rejection of the authority and attraction of European culture and all its ways.

The Middle East is of considerable scholarly interest since the whole thrust of the author's works has of late created quite a stir in certain circles that have only a polemical interest in this part of the world. After holding a chair since 1949 at the London School of Oriental and African Studies, Bernard Lewis became a professor (now emeritus) of Near Eastern studies at Princeton University in 1974. A long-time member of the Institute of Advanced Study, he is renowned for his teaching, his writings, and his example as the most versatile and prolific of today's Orientalists.

He first attracted the attention of what was then a small but select gild of Arabists while still at London University more than half a century ago, with the publication in 1940 of a seminal doctoral thesis on *The Origins of Ismailism: A Study on the Historical Background of the Fatimid Caliphate*. Republished in 1968 under the title *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam*, this account of Shiite political activism at the time of the Crusades gained a wide and enthusiastic readership outside the academic community.

Then came a steady flow of books and monographs shedding new light and fresh interpretations on a wide variety of aspects of Islamic history. Lewis began to broaden his interests beyond the Middle Ages to more modern and contemporary themes by way of a fascination with Ottoman history, which he was one of the first scholars to study systematically on the basis of the recently opened Turkish archives. This stream of almost yearly publications, showing a range and depth of scholarship unrivaled in the profession, included such notable works as *The Arabs in History*, now in its sixth edition and still after more than four decades the standard work on the subject; *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, a study published under the auspices of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, which remains the best available book on the transition from Ottoman to modern Turkey; and *Istanbul and the Civilization of the Ottoman Empire*, a dazzling evocation of the reign of Süleiman the Magnificent. *The Middle East and the West*, which has achieved the rare feat of being translated into both Hebrew and Arabic, by the Israeli Ministry of Defense, on the one hand, and the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, on the other, was subsequently revised and updated under the even more suggestive title, *The Shaping of the Modern Middle East. Race and Color in Islam* (later expanded, it became *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry*) was one of the few works to draw attention to the persistence of slavery in the Arab world. Then there was *Islam and History*, a collection of essays revised and expanded in 1993 into a volume more than twice its original size, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*, the only book to explore such a subject; *The Jews of Islam*, on the Sephardi communities and their changing fortunes; *Semites and Anti-Semites*, a devastating exposé of the spread and diffusion of Western ideas throughout the Arab world; *History Remembered, Recovered, Invented*, containing a wealth of illustrations drawn mostly from the Middle East; and *The Political Language of Islam*, which demonstrates Lewis's enduring fascination with the vocabulary of governance and power and the changing meaning of words, loan words, and their etymologies. He is also the editor or co-editor of the three collective works to which the present book can rightly be compared: the new edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, which has so far only reached the letter *m*; the venerable two-volume *Cambridge History of Islam*, regarded by many as somewhat flawed because of its concentration on political history; and the highly acclaimed

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Islam and the Arab World, to which he contributed two essays and an epilogue.

With such an impressive record, it should come as no surprise that this, Lewis's latest endeavor, is a virtuoso performance, which once again demonstrates an intimate and confident familiarity with the sources combined with an enviable gift for compression and lucidity of expression.

Miss Rat & the artists

Linda Leavell Marianne Moore and the Visual Arts: Prismatic Color. Louisiana State University Press, 237 pages, $30

reviewed by David Yezzi

Perhaps the most recognized images of Marianne Moore (1887–1972) are as poetry's elder statesman in a tricorn hat, appearing with Joe Louis on the cover of *Esquire* magazine or lobbing out the first ball at a Yankees series opener. Such unlikely photo-ops capture the later celebrity enjoyed by the poet, but little of her renowned decorum and restraint (though idiosyncrasy had long been a hallmark of her poems). Currently on view in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition "As They Were: 1900–1929" are two portraits of Moore done by artists of the poet's acquaintance from New York art circles in the early 1920s. The likenesses, an ostrich-necked bust of Miss Moore by French-American sculptor Gaston Lachaise and a pencil sketch by William Zorach of a braid-bedecked Marianne decorously posed, give us the poet in her youth. That Moore represents only one of several poets and writers pictured in the Met's exhibition—Charles Demuth's tribute to William Carlos Williams, *The Figure Five in Gold*, and Jo Davidson's famous bronze of Gertrude Stein in a sumolike squat are also included—suggests a kinship between writers and artists of the period that is at the heart of Linda Leavell's new study, *Marianne Moore and the Visual Arts*.

According to Professor Leavell, Moore modeled for Lachaise and for Zorach and his wife, Marguerite, in early 1925, the year after *Observations*, the first U.S. edition of her poems, appeared. The book received *The Dial* award, and in a matter of months its author was given first acting, then full editorship of *The Dial*, a job Moore held until the magazine closed doors in 1929. Under Scofield Thayer and James Sibly Watson, *The Dial* had long featured contemporary artwork in its pages, and though Moore's initial responsibilities did not include art, in time, with Thayer's declining health, Moore assumed a role in the selection of pictures. While Moore preferred representation to abstraction, she displayed a resistance to nudes, a reserve that extended to literature in the case of James Joyce, whose excerpt from "Anna Livia Plurabelle" she rejected when Joyce refused to excise the bawdy bits. Among the artists whose works in *The Dial* provided "intensives on the text" were Lachaise, the Zorachs, Georgia O'Keeffe, Charles Sheeler, and Arthur Dove (as well as the Europeans de Chirico, Picasso, Cocteau, Seurat, and Brancusi). As Professor Leavell points out in the useful biographical passages of her book, *The Dial* years were by no means Moore's introduction to the New York art scene, but rather the culmination of a familiarity with the artists and works of American modernism that began with what Moore called her "sojourn in the whale," the trip she made to Manhattan from Carlisle, Pennsylvania, ten years earlier.

Born in a suburb of St. Louis, that most fertile of breeding grounds for modernist poets, Moore didn't know her father, whose nervous breakdown wound him back in his parental home, never to see his family again. Throughout her life, Moore kept house with her mother, an arrangement that lasted until the elder Moore's death in 1947. In 1894, Moore moved from Missouri with her mother and older brother, John, to Carlisle; Bryn Mawr College in 1905; back to Carlisle for a year of business courses; a summer abroad; then a stint of teaching at a United

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States Indian School. In college she wrote poetry of some note and was classmates with Hilda Doolittle. Moore's first publication came in 1915 in *The Egoist*, edited by Richard Aldington, who was by then married to H.D.

It was in that year that Moore traveled to New York at the invitation of Arthur Kreymborg, editor of *Others*, the magazine that championed Moore's groundbreaking poems along with those of Stevens and Williams. Outfitted in a new striped coat, a gift from her mother, and carrying a map of the city, she began her trip with a visit to Alfred Stieglitz's gallery, 291, later writing to her brother with characteristically guarded amazement that:

> Mr. Stieglitz was exceedingly unemotional, and friendly and finally after telling me how he was hated, said I might come back and look at some of the things standing with their faces to the wall in the back room. I enjoyed them. He has a magnificent little thing of the sea in dark blue and some paintings of mountains by a man named Hartley, also some Picabias and Picassos and so on. He told me to come back and he would show me some other things.

With Kreymborg, she visited the sculptor and poet Adolph Wolf. Then there were the galleries: shows of Van Gogh and the Zorachs. And introductions: Moore met Alanson Hartpence of the Daniel Gallery who showed her works by Man Ray and Prendergrast. But it was with the "straight photography" of Stieglitz and Edward Steichen that she became smitten, declaring them "the most beautiful things Rat ever saw." (The Moores at the time had taken to calling each other by names borrowed from *The Wind in the Willows*; thus "Rat," the scribbler of verses. Other familial monikers, "Fish," "Basilisk," and "Pangolin," later appeared as poem titles.) Through her *Others* connections, Moore began a long-standing, loose affiliation with the artists of the Stieglitz circle, which, with Walter Arensberg's coterie of Dadaists, was at the heart of the post-Armory Show New York art world. It is Leavell's contention that Moore's particular brand of poem takes its cues less from, say, the French Symbolists or from Pound (as Pound himself suggested), than from the challenges posed by painters and sculptors of the day. Modernism, as conceived by Leavell and the critics she cites, comprises an interdisciplinary movement cutting broadly across the whole of the arts.

Leavell, while noting the apparent imprecision of such indiciplinary comparison, quotes Wendy Steiner's *The Colors of Rhetoric* (Chicago, 1982) as a work that helped to "clarify [her] thinking": "The interartistic comparison inevitably reveals the aesthetic norms of the period during which the question is asked." This is clarity? Yet to employ the language of one art form to describe another is, for the most part, to speak in tropes. One can refer to the architecture of a stanza, but faulty prosody and clumsy line-breaks have never caused a building to collapse. The claims for a Cubist aesthetic in literature may suggest a disruption of traditional syntax, but any direct corollary between syntax and the interplay of colors and forms on a canvas is, beyond the metaphorical, tenuous at best. This is not to say that such comparisons are without utility, only that they can take us just so far. Leavell, in considering Moore's rhymed syllabic stanzas, suggests certain technical similarities to Cubism and collage, while carefully observing the line which ultimately divides them from poetry. Such correspondences, however, sit more comfortably within the purview of the poet than the critic.

Leavell at her most convincing is quite good indeed, which is to say that certain corollaries are more useful than others. The term *collage*—Leavell prefers the more general *assemblage*—works well to describe a certain aspect of the way Moore makes poems, i.e., her collecting of quotations appropriated from far-flung, eclectic sources.

> "Picking periwinkles from the cracks"
> or killing prey with the concentric crushing

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rigor of the python,
it hovers forward "spider fashion
on its arms" misleadingly like lace;
its "ghostly pallor changing
to the green metallic tinge of an
anemone-starred pool."
The fir-trees, in "the magnitude of their root
systems,"
rise aloof from these maneuvers "creepy to
behold,"
austere specimens of our American royal
families,
"each like the shadow of the one beside it."

This passage from "An Octopus," likening the ice-fingers of the glacier atop Mount Rainier to an cephalopod's tentacles, quotes six times in ten lines from sources as diverse as Ruskin and the *Illustrated London News*. As Moore stated with regard to the assemblages of Joseph Cornell, the artist's "sense of design" and "consistent rigor of selection, constitutes, it seems to me, a phase of poetry." Snippets of newspaper, seemingly ubiquitous in visual collage, provided Moore with endless material, and to similar effect. Whereas the found materials of collage—despite their contribution to the overall composition—remain essentially newsprint or wood, the found phrases in Moore's poetry never completely lose their ties to sources outside the poem. Moore's use of quotation, as Leavell notes, is not that of Eliot or Pound, who by and large employ fragments from works well-known to the general reader. Moore's fragments from the media and obscure scientific studies, each meticulously cited in her copious notes to the poems, perform a satire on allusion—rather than enlarge the scope of her poems with outside resonances, the lifted passages serve mostly to underscore Moore's quirky reading habits. Occasionally, the quotations are invented, or, in the case of certain dramatic monologues Moore wrote while at Bryn Mawr, attributed to fictional characters. "Selecting is a humbler art than making," Leavell tells us, an apposite method for this most modest of poets.

But what are we to make of what Leavell describes as the Cubist "spatial" qualities of Moore's syntax as it relates to the poem's presentation on the page?

THE FISH

wade
through black jade.
Of the crow-blue mussel-shells, one keeps
adjusting the ash-heaps;
opening and shutting itself like

an
injured fan.
The barnacles which encrust the side
of the wave, cannot hide
there for the submerged shafts of the

sun,
split like spun
glass, move themselves with spotlight
swiftness
into the crevices—
in and out, illuminating

the
turquoise sea
of bodies. The water drives a wedge
of iron through the iron edge
of the cliff; whereupon the stars,

pink
rice-grains, ink-
bespattered jelly-fish, crabs like green
lilies, and submarine
toadstools, slide each on the other . . .

These stanzas exemplify the willed tension in Moore between the movement of her sentences and the strictures of the nonce stanzas into which she pours them. By traditional standards of form, some of Moore's choices make for a jarring read: whole lines held by the semantically weak *an* or *the*; enjambment after a hyphen; the title as first line hovering in block caps. That these beautifully wrought, fairly conventional sentences fidget in their ill-fitting clothes, however, is one of the greatest

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pleasures of the poem. Yet do a mismatched syntax and stanza form go toward the creation of a "spatial" element in poetry—an attention to the poem's surface confluent with the Cubists' attention to the surface of a canvas? Of Moore's attention to the pattern that a poem cuts on the page there can be little doubt, but by her own admission the poem's visual shape is of secondary importance; that Moore later revised a number of her stanzaic poems into free verse for better flow bears this out.

Another prominent "ism" weighed with Moore's poetry is the Precisionism of Georgia O'Keeffe and Charles Sheeler. Leavell quickly admits that the term itself, one central to a large portion of her book, is a dubious one; a critical tool wielded after the fact, "Precisionism" describes a group of artists who never identified themselves with each other. Moore, for her part, does use the word *precisionists* in the poem "Bowls," but with reference, Leavell admits, to writers not painters. While Moore may have known certain of these artists personally, tracing any direct allegiance with them or to the aesthetic "challenges" they address in their art work ends only in frustration.

Leavell then eschews "precisionism" in favor of "functionalism," which she claims "more accurately describes the aesthetic Moore shared with visual artists such as Sheeler, Demuth, O'Keeffe, and Strand . . . for all were interested in the aesthetic relationship between form and function in both nature and technology," later adding that the technology bit was of less interest to the poet. Moore was clearly fascinated by the way things work, in technical manuals and science journals, and in the built-in, anatomical devices animals use for defense; as Elizabeth Bishop put it:

> Marianne was intensely interested in the techniques of things—how camellias are grown; how the quartz prisms work in crystal clocks; how the pangolin can close up its ear, nose and eye apertures and walk on the outside edges of its hands "and save the claws/ for digging"; how to drive a car; how the best pitchers throw a baseball; how to make a figurehead for her nephew's sailboat.

The juxtaposition of Moore's poems with Paul Strand's photographs of gears or O'Keeffe's skyscrapers, however, only serves to muddy Moore's peculiar vision, a vision often incorporating no little amount of fancy. As Moore's delightful "Ford Correspondence"—an exchange of letters between the poet and the car company which later ran in *The New Yorker*—suggests, her response to actual machines, in this case a new model of automobile for which Moore was to devise the name, was less functionalist than whimsical. Having requested sketches of the car and using the already-existing Thunderbird as her model, Moore delivered a spate of names the likes of which Madison Avenue has never seen: there was The Ford Fabergé, The Intelligent Whale, The Resilient Bullet; then came Mongoose Civique, Aeroterre, Pastelogram; and, lastly, Turcotingo and Utopian Turtletop. The company responded with a Christmas greeting addressed to "our favorite Turtletopper," but never went for any of her inventions, choosing instead a name utterly devoid of "gusto," that prized Moorean quality—in the end, the car was blandly christened Edsel.

Finally, Leavell's likening of Moore's artistic concerns to those of visual artists, such as the Cubists and Precisionists, works best as an extension of biography, where the timeline of contemporary visual art is superimposed over that of Moore's early career—the book focuses on the years up to 1929. It is of interest to discover what Moore made of the art of her friends and contemporaries. One can note, as Leavell does, the suggestions in Moore's essays and her "Comment" pieces in *The Dial* of not only an appreciation of the visual arts but actual fellow feeling. As a placement of Moore's poetry within a relevant and thoroughly researched historical context, *Marianne Moore and the Visual Arts* provides a lively codicil to Charles Molesworth's de-

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finitive *Marianne Moore: A Literary Life* (Atheneum, 1990). The keys to the panoply of riches that her poetry has to offer, however, are better discovered in Donald Hall's *Marianne Moore: The Cage and the Animal* (Pegasus, 1970), as well as the sterling collection of critical essays from Prentice-Hall (1969) edited by Charles Tomlinson, studies which are—in A. R. Gordon's phrase quoted by Moore in "When I Buy Pictures"—"lit with piercing glances into the life of things."

Englishing the "Odes"

D. S. Carne-Ross
& Kenneth Haynes, editors
Horace in English. Penguin,
560 pages, $14.95 paper

reviewed by Donald Lyons

"Now and again, an anthology is published which is also a real book. That is, the editor's selection shows us new ways of reading poetry," said Thom Gunn about *The New Oxford Book of Sixteenth-Century Verse* (1991) edited by Emrys Jones. One of Jones's best ideas was the copious inclusion of translations, for the Elizabethan age was when English verse learned to incorporate old and new classics. There were Wyatt's Horace, Surrey's Virgil, Marlowe's Lucan, Harrington's Ariosto, Chapman's Homer, Fairfax's Tasso. The ancient author most congenial to that time was Ovid, who tempted Marlowe to do the *Amores*, Drayton to do the *Heroical Epistles* (adapted to English history), and Golding to do the *Metamorphoses*.

Now comes the splendid *Horace in English*, first of a new Penguin series that is to include Virgil, Homer, and Martial in English. The Horace volume is edited by D. S. Carne-Ross and Kenneth Haynes and introduced by Carne-Ross, who, as he showed in his *Pindar* (1985), weds easily borne learning to a contemporary poetic sensibility.

Carne-Ross is a modernist, a Poundian, who sees indeed in Pound's reshaping of the English line (not least in Pound's "Homage to Sextus Propertius") a key achievement of modern poetry. Small wonder that Propertius's and Pindar's clashing tonalities and logical leaps speak to Carne-Ross. But Horace? Gentle, sage, quotidian, maxim-dispensing, emperor-flattering, wine-bibbing, tart-cuddling, farm-loving Horace? The poet we hated in school? The very voice of wry middle age? The anti-Catullus?

Well, Carne-Ross, wearing his modernism with a difference, loves in Horace the lilt of a heart-stopping phrase and proves that many a fine English poet has, too. Of course, there are two Horaces: the composer of the trickily musical odes and the writer of the more discursive satires and epistles. The one who came triumphantly into English was the latter, and even he had to wait until the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This book is arranged chronologically within genres—odes, epodes, satires, epistles—and the reader might turn first to the satires and epistles as done by Cowley (1668), Rochester (1680), Oldham (1681), and, supremely, Pope. Pope's transfusions of English blood into Roman Horace are some of the happiest things in literary history. What Pope does is not translation but Englishing in the full sense: for content, he finds English equivalents in the society and letters and politics of England for the things Horace was writing about Rome; for form, he has his Mozartian command of the English heroic couplet. To illustrate the dynamics of this Augustan "imitation," Carne-Ross prints a literal modern version *en face* with Pope's version of Epistle 2.1 on Roman literature. At one point in the modern version, the debased Roman theater audience "demand[s] in mid-play a bear or boxers (that's what thrills the mob)." Here's Pope:

> There still remains to mortify a Wit,
> The many-headed Monster of the Pit:
> A sense-less, worth-less, and unhonour'd
> crowd;

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Who to disturb their betters mighty proud,
Clatt'ring their sticks, before ten lines
are spoke,
Call for the Farce, the Bear, or the Black-joke.
What dear delight to Britons Farce affords!
Farce once the taste of Mobs, but now
of Lords.

Pope's couplets make Horace live because they exactly express a polite civilization comparable to Horace's; the academic's limp rendering (and note how he steals Pope's *mob* for Horace's *plebecula*) merely points to life elsewhere.

There's been no Pope for the refractory *Odes*. In their intricately tesselated patterning and their fugitive attitudes (and lately, it must be said, in their occasional but inevitable patriotism—the word "fascist" has been hurled by modish Latinists), they've largely resisted Englishing. What little of excellence exists in English is here: Ben Jonson and Pope on love at age fifty; Dryden's extraordinary "Pindarique Paraphrase" of 3.29; Thomas Tickell's adaptation of the Paris ode to the Jacobite rebellion; John Quincy Adams's (yes, the same one) delightful version of "Integer vitae." And, true to his modernist attachments, Carne-Ross makes a case for some gnarled, thickly twisted metrically adventurous versions: three fascinating late tries by Ezra Pound, one by Basil Bunting, and a proleptically modernist stab at the Pyrrha ode by John Milton. For the rest, the editors dutifully print as many decent Englishings over the centuries of as many odes as possible. Carne-Ross thinks highly, too highly, of recent versions by C. H. Sisson and David Ferry—but they are clear and simple, I grant.

There's a concluding "selection of poems that would not have been written but for Horace": we get Marvell's "Horatian Ode" on Cromwell, a poem Carne-Ross calls "more searching . . . than the only work of Horace to which it can by directly compared, the Cleopatra Ode"—itself a great poem that has, apparently, never been interestingly translated; Carew on spring (this a real discovery); Pope on women; Kipling's three delightful Horatian parodies; and Frost's "A Lesson for Today." Actually, an awful lot of Frost is Horatian, and a lyric selection might have been fresher. Say "Reluctance," which concludes:

Ah, when to the heart of man
Was it ever less than a treason
To go with the drift of things,
To yield with a grace to reason,
And bow and accept the end
Of a love or a season?

Reluctantly Horatian, too, in his love of retrospective sadness, was, as Carne-Ross shrewdly notes, the programatically anti-classical Philip Larkin.

This is a wonderful anthology, life-giving and thought-provoking—a real book.

Editor's note: Readers are reminded that *The New Criterion* does not publish in July or August. Our next issue will appear in September.

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Letters

What Gore remembers

To the Editors:
John Simon says Gore Vidal is "a perfect bitch" (December 1995). What Mr. Simon does not write is that Simon, too, is a bitch, although a rather less perfect one.

What an unpleasant surprise his essay "What Gore Remembers" proved for this reader! I regard Mr. Simon as a rather savvy theater critic, but having been in that world many years how can he be so homophobic, so priggish and silly on the subject of Vidal's sexuality? And who *cares*? Where has Simon *been*? Not inhaling?

There is plenty to deplore in Vidal; I think he is just as egocentric, arrogant, and superficial as Mr. Simon makes him out; but by engaging the "bitch" in a field of combat that is defined by Vidal's own terms, Mr. Simon loses his ethos, his position from which to criticize. I wonder if he ever thought of that?

"What sort of companions does one pick up at the Everard Baths. . . . And why does one go on living with such a person for the rest of one's life?" (page 26)—if that is the level of moral instruction Simon thinks to engage in, he'd better not try. Bummer!

When dealing with the likes of a Vidal, Mr. Simon should know (as Shakespeare exemplified), that it is best to take the high ground. I was a little disappointed that the editors of *The New Criterion* would publish Mr. Simon in such a light; don't you exercise some taste in editing your writers?

J. A. van Sant
Santa Fe, N.M.

John Simon replies:
It never ceases to amaze me that one can learn to write without learning to read. Mr. van Sant's single substantive point is my alleged homophobia and shock at Vidal's picking up a partner at the Everard Baths, then turning him into a lifetime companion. Personally, I don't care whether Vidal beds a man, a woman, or a goat. My concern—clear to anyone who can read—is with truthfulness. Vidal keeps on insisting that the secret of his happy life with Howard Austen is that it has been a platonic relationship all along. However, one does not go to the Baths for asexual couplings, and if one is a person of normal, heterosexual or homosexual, appetites, one does not enter in one's youth on a long-range relationship on a sexless basis, whatever changes may occur in the course of time.

Editor's note: In his essay "Death fugues: the poems of Paul Celan" (May 1996), Mr. Simon referred to the atomic scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer as David. The confusion arose from the name of the former dean of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, David Oppenheim.

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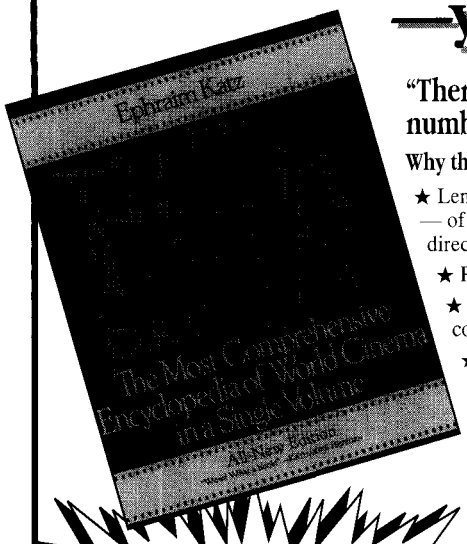

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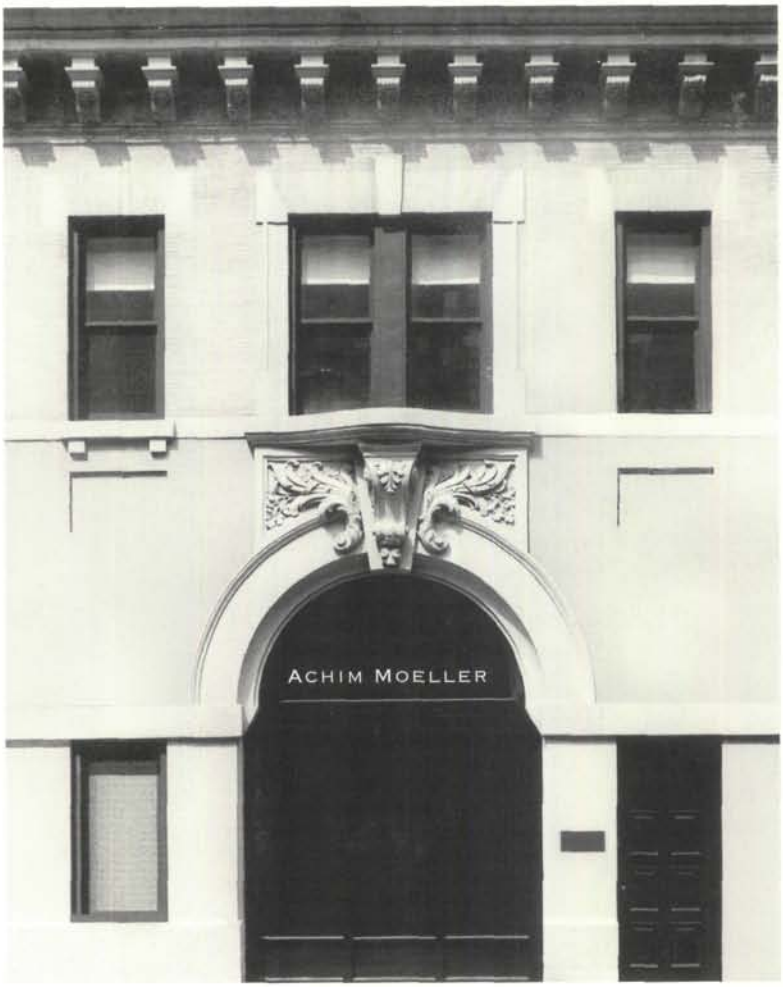

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